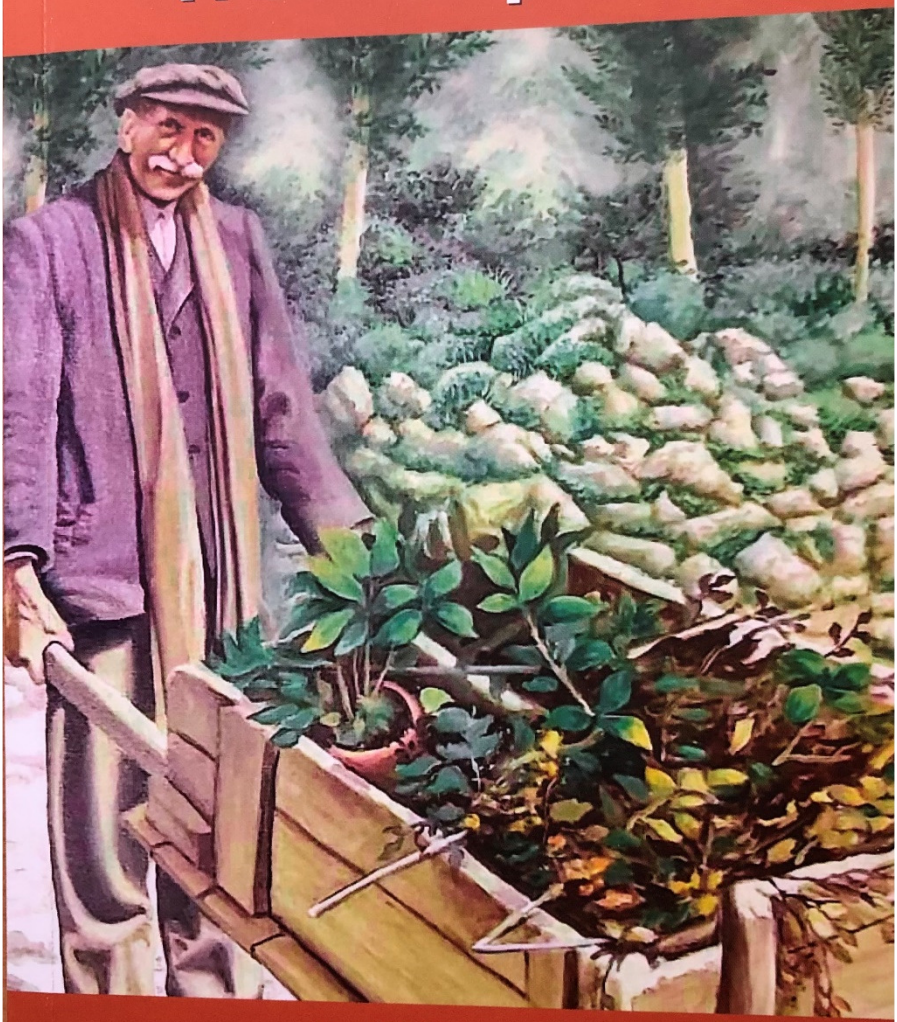
Crazy for God and Poor
francis perez



By: MARIO GADILI
English: Abraham J Odalany

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FRANCIS PEREZ

Crazy for God and Poor

Italian Author: **MARIO GADILI**
English**: Abraham Odalany.**

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FOREWORD BY THE SUPERIOR GENERAL

Dear readers,

With pleasure we present you the first English version of the biography of Brother Francis Perez.

Francis Perez was one of the first collaborators of the Opera, in its very initial stage, which offered no security in human and institutional point of view. Francis' great confidence guided him to discover and live the Gospel entirely, as pioneered by a young Veronese priest, Fr. John Calabria.

Earl Francis Perez, one of the prominent nobles of Verona, highly educated, holding many public offices, resigned all regalia, sold off all his earthly possessions and entered San Zeno in Monte, to begin, at the age of 48, a new life only for God and the poorest. He made his religious vows together with other brothers of the Opera. He lived in absolute poverty, poorest among the poor. With joy and humility, he accepted whatever service is asked of him in the House. Fr. John Calabria had always held great trust in him, to the point that for many years he entrusted him with the task of training the new brothers of the Opera.

This English publication is, first of all, addressed to the members of the Calabrian Family in various capacities with the aim of knowing the life and testimony of a Brother who lived the *pure and genuine spirit* of the Opera in a radical way. And we hope that this book would always inspire the readers to live differently in a public office, assume with a new spirit any responsibility in the society. In short, this book will inspire and guide all the readers, religious and laity of our times to know the "sources" of our spirituality embodied in the lifestyle of the Founder St. John Calabria along with his first collaborators.

Knowing this biography, we also recognize the roots of the Congregation and Calabrian family made up of Priests, Brothers, Sisters and Laity. Deepening the life of this extraordinary and humble figure Francis, a Poor Servant Religious, will enlighten us to face the challenges to seek the last place, for the kingdom belongs to such. Knowing the life and testimony of a Poor Servant Bro. Francis Perez will be a great stimulus for every consecrated person in the daily search for holiness and live the pure and genuine spirit of the Calabrian Family and the Gospel.

Venerable Brother Francis Perez is in the process of beatification and canonization. His heroic virtues were already approved and we can ask for his interception in our prayers to obtain

graces so that he may inspire and give new vocations as Consecrated Brother in the Opera.

And, finally, my heartfelt thanks to the author of the Biography, Fr. Mario Gadili who put all his effort, passion and competence to spot out the lamp from «*under a bushel*» and tried to place it on the candlestick so that this could "shed light on all who are in the house" (Mt 5:15).

Also, we acknowledge our gratitude to our Religious, Abraham Odalany, and his team Joseph Koovakal, Sebastian P.J, and Mark Jonnel Magos who took interest and cared the English translation.

Wishing everyone a meaningful read and desiring that these pages stimulates in us a profound desire to love and serve the Lord in the daily search for gospel holiness by living our life and vocation with humility and evangelical poverty to transform us gradually '*living gospels'* very close to God and the poor.

P. Miguel Tofful,

Superior General,
Poor Servants of Divine Providence (PSDP)
Verona. 25.03.2020

PREFACE

There is no choice worthy of human beings if it does not spring from and inspired by love. And in human beings there is no authentic love if one does not discover its sources of nourishment in love; which is the true description of God: "God is love". We find in Francis Perez a baptised person, who gradually discovered in his religious call a heroic way of living his Christian vocation, that is indeed "To follow Christ more closely".

Francis is the fifth fruit of a vibrant tree that generated as many as ten siblings. God prepared and presented him in a singular way through an exceptional family.

The parents, The Earl Antonio Perez and the Marchesa Anna Da Lisca, were not only nobles by title, distinction and enrolment, but above all they were also two rich, and courageous personalities. They were exceptionally formed on the Christian principles and praxis with much depth and clarity as expressed by St. John Paul II in the Apostolic Exhortation "*Familiaris Consortio*"[1].

The two noble parents, Earl Antonio Perez[2], a University graduate, and Marchesa Anna, of upright values, were in love with each other. Their family life was not just a relationship of fidelity, but was of total

[1] The Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II promulgated following the 1980 Synod of Bishops.

[2] Antonio Perez (1821-1890) was an Italian political personality, held the office of Verona City Mayor, Parliamentarian of the xi Legislature of the Italian kingdom.

pervasion that lived in every moment of their lives. And they spent time with simplicity and intensity, spontaneously and naturally incarnating the mystical nuptial relationship between Christ and the Church which is indeed the soul of the Sacrament of Marriage.

The dense correspondence that runs between Anna and her brother-in-law, Fr. Paul Perez, a highly qualified and virtuous person of Oratory Congregation, confirms the esteem and admiration without shadows that the Marchesa had for her husband. And they deserved it. He too, in the fraternal confidences with Fr. Paul, speaking of his wife, exclaimed: "What a fine lady!"

No wonder that the couple Perez's nest was so cheerful and numerous. Every life that blossomed there, was considered with love, welcomed with joy, and educated with great commitment. The educational task, the shared and joint domestic care in admirable agreement, the public commitments of Earl Antonio, the diligent administration of material goods, the zeal for the human and Christian elevation of employees etc., seem not enough for the happy couple.

They do not regret the choice of married life freely chosen by them. But in one sense the extraordinary spiritual tension, a true yearning for holiness, accompanied these partners throughout their lives.

In addition to the richness of prayer and charity that really made this house a domestic church, there are also some revealing traits of a calm but sincere longing for a higher life: *"Pray, my dear - writes Earl Antonio to his brother Fr. Paul who, forced as to be in the world*

and in his vortex, let me also do some good that will lead me to that road pointed out to me by parents and by so many relatives, that, if not trodden by me, would make me more responsible in the face of Divine Mercy"

That expression "*as I am compelled to be in the world*" does not mean regret, but an incessant effort to reach the heights of the Christian vocation.

Similar expressions are found in the wise and bold letters of the Marchesa Anna.

The nobility of the Earl Perez, of which we have records since 1400, always enumerating the exemplary characters. Who served in arms, who in public roles, and very often in excellent vocations in the Diocesan clergy and monasteries? There are no shadows in that fortunate lineage.

So much wealth of principles was in full force when Francis was born. Born in Verona, on July 9, 1861, he transmigrated as a young man to the Perez palace -Pompei in Via Cavour. Then, for long periods, residing in the villa of Zevio, where the family owned vast estates.

Francis, after having completed the primary school classes in the family, was first enrolled in the Real College "Carlo Alberto" of Moncalieri, held by the Barnabites. Afterwards he passed to the Rosminian Institute of Domodossola at his uncle, a valuable religious and literary example. The upper gymnasium he attended as day scholar in the Episcopal Seminary of Verona. From there he moved to

the Liceo Maffei and, thereafter, to the University of Padua, where he graduated in Law, at the age of 24, on November 19, 1885.

Life of Francis can be divided into two periods: Up to 48 years, a lay person in the world; and subsequently until his death, as a religious brother among the Poor Servants of Divine Providence.

It is also important and inspiring even for the politicians and administrators of today's public affairs to highlight his secularity, practiced as a way to sanctity, in addition to his holy life in the Institute.

Two non-contradictory dimensions, we shall say not even different, but progressive, of that royal direction indicated to the laity both by the Sacred Scriptures and by the first fruits of the Church's history, and by the instructive clarifications of the Second Vatican Council by the added Apostolic Magisterium, so complete and articulated in the "*Christi Fideles Laici*".

LAYMAN IN THE WORLD

Francis' father, Earl Antonio, was a very active man, and an adamantly honest public servant. He served as Attorney General, Mayor of Zevio, Pro-mayor of Verona, and President of the Holy Places of the city. He was also a Member of Parliament in 1871, one year after the capture of Rome. He loved his homeland and wanted it united, happy and Christian. But the courage that made him accept a seat in the Senate House, considering the temporal power, could not tolerate, however, the heavy, petty and hypocritical anti-

clericalism that stagnated in that assembly which had nothing to do with the public good.

And, as he writes, "*not to betray his conscience as a Christian"*, two years later he resigned.

He never took a dime from these multiple public offices. He counted everything as a mission. He witnessed into the family and society that royal priesthood which he felt alive as a Christian layman.

And thus, did Francis. Although he had two religious uncles, Fr. Louis of the Oratorian of St. Philip and Fr. Paul Rosminian, in no sources we can trace that he aspired to the priesthood.

Unlike his father, it never occurred to him to form his own family. But he did not deny it in indolent diversion as a rich bachelor.

He engaged in the lay apostolate, placing himself fully at the service of the Church. From catechism to children, to assistance in oratory, participation in electoral struggles, then far more ardent and idolized than today, he lived intensely, as a student and as a graduate, his Christian commitment.

Among the many fields open even then to the laity of wise shepherds, he preferring the task of advocating and practicing social justice and charity. They are not two different virtues, especially if we mean charity as fraternity and not almsgiving, and social justice, not as an angry claim fuelled by hatred, but as a diligent commitment to the integral promotion of man.

To begin with, his relationship with the employees was exemplary. In times of heavy exploitation of the workers, he, stimulated also by the magisterium of Pope Leo XIII, with the lucid and prophetic "Rerum Novarum", inspired by the studies and movements aroused by Bishop Ketteler (Freiherr Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler was a German theologian and politician who served as Bishop of Mainz. His social teachings became influential during the papacy of Leo XIII and his encyclical Rerum Novarum.) and the layman Giuseppe Toniolo, Perez wanted to review all contracts with the tenants in the light of the doctrine of the Church. Not sure and satisfied of it, he had them examined by that experienced and wise man who was Msg. Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-1872) is best known today as the inspirational leader of the Italian Risorgimento. Manzini and other competent, received astounded admiration and acclaim.

Francis broadened his commitment. Fighting for evangelical justice, he clashed with the roots of socialist ideologies, but even more so with the fervent tyranny of capitalists and agrarian owners who felt threatened by those Christian novelties. Yet, not a few drew from him the clarity of life and sincere friendship.

This frank profession of the practical Gospel made a heap of assignments rain down on him: member of the Zevio City Council, Auditor, Inspector of various schools in the area, President of the complicated Association of Charity and other pious foundations for the poor. It was public money, money of the poor. He, like his father, never accepted a penny from his multiple public occupations. He not only cared for interests of the poor, saving himself with intuition and firmness from cliental pressures, but to the poor he was a servant, walking from Zevio to Verona several times to carry out the practices

of those who do not count, never slept long sleeps on the tables of bureaucracy, practices in those days as well as our times. This image of Perez is not the result of fantasy, but appears from his office files.

He was Superintendent of the Zevio Hospital, Inspector of Doctors and Pharmacists in the area, also attracting criticism for his impartiality. But it wasn't enough yet. Already a member of the Conference of St. Vincent, he assumed the main responsibilities in the diocesan field in obedience to the bishop, and held them until his entry into the Opera, with Fr. Calabria and for some time longer. The Bishop of Verona at that time was Cardinal Bartolome Bacilieri. Perez presented to him the annual economic and moral report.

From the three reports we have, we can see, between arid data and narratives of pious cases and, the progress of a new learning. Francis is back at school. His teachers are the poor. The university classrooms are the slums he visited, the squalid attics, the shaky stairs, the hunger painted on the faces, tuberculosis and malnutrition diseases that in the city and in the countryside claimed victims by thousands.

I refer only one, from 1899: "*You know what schools of pain are those hovels sometimes embossing, those narrow attics, where the lack of air takes your breath away, without shelter from heat and cold. At this school we feel raised, we feel brought closer to those ill-fated families, and after hearing their very sad events, we can hardly suppress the tears bursting from our eyelids*".

And the power of divine grace drags Francis to share. A thoughtful and attentive schoolboy, he already thinks of being like those of his

unwitting masters, entering the heart of poverty to enjoy it experimentally: poor with poor Christ.

LAYMAN AMONG THE RELIGIOUS POOR SERVANTS

Is it a crisis? Not only does Francis wants to help, to serve, to promote, to work for the poor, but to become poor! The first was a casual meeting, and the convention, then with the cleric Calabria would lead him to decide to accept the insistent invitation of Jesus: "*If you want to be perfect, go, sell, give to the poor and follow me*".

Perhaps it was this radical choice that made Francis decide to discard other possibilities of religious life that best suited his nobility, culture and noble affiliation: he ~~it~~ will not be a Rosminian, nor anything else, but humble disciple of a poor priest, of a seeker of the poorer in an institution that is still incipient and almost non-existent, where everything was uncertain, except for one thing: absolute poverty.

He entered the Opera at the age of 48. And here begins his second way of being a lay person. He does not opt for the priesthood. He will be a Brother, servant of the little ones, washing their dirty feet, filthy hands, freeing from parasites and ringworm from the repellent heads. He will be the man of the broom, of the wheelbarrow, of the service to the last, with no slight scandal of relatives, friends and colleagues of nobility and wealth.

That's how he found his paradise. At the school of Fr. Calabria, although he is nine years older, he will listen to him to learn

obedience, prayer, concealment, and service. He will use the sour bread, the tatty dress, and the poorest bed.

Brother among brothers, he will hide his culture, thirsting to learn another science. His writings as a religious reach the heights of mysticism.

"The Earl is dead," he will reply to the curious who will ask him about his past. He has fully understood Fr. Calabria's intuition about equal dignity between priest and brother, from the point of view of religious consecration. Emptied of everything, always dressed in clothes discarded by others, he rejoiced in amazement, every day, in contemplating Providence at work. He received everything in charity, always grateful. Never a regret, never a lament, except that of not being able to be holy.

Always, and especially in the advanced age, he will spend long hours in the chapel talking to Jesus. Fr. Luigi Pedrollo, observed Perez' frequent, unseen, deep breath and hissing of Francis with his eyes fixed on the tabernacle.

After all, the more he buried himself, the more he excelled. Lay brethren, mostly from various experiences around the world, sometimes found some repugnance in the face of services that were too humble. It is well known the phrase that often uttered one of them when nature struggled with grace: The Earl does it? And why can't I too do that?

What about his humble and utter attachment to the Founder? Fr. Calabria loved to keep him in his workroom. He wrote and Francis

prayed. Sometimes, Father John provoked him: *But you, Francis, are a saint*, *everyone says so*. Francis, instinctively, denied: *No, Fr. John, it is not true, it is not true*! *"How?* father Calabria replied him, *I would be a liar!... - No, father, but...* and his confusion was total.

What he thought of Francis, Fr. Calabria himself wrote so, a few days after his death on December 4, 1937: "*I have always judged, esteemed him as a true saint, a true servant of God, and I hope that one day the Lord will glorify him even on earth. Perez, Perez, Perez, pray for me!"*

We just need these brief nods. The large volume of the testimonies collected by the ecclesiastical tribunal will speak the rest. The members have done their duty scrupulously and witnesses are abundant and in agreement.

Now, our task is fulfilled. By putting our work back to the apostolic authority, we seem to be able to say that Francis Perez has a precise message to entrust to our time, the same that Pope St. John Paul II entrusts to today's Christians, in the "Christi Fideles Laici": *"Everyone in the Church, just because they are members, receive and therefore share the common vocation to holiness. In its own right, without difference from other members of the Church, lay people are called to it. All the faithful of any state or degree are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity.*" No.39

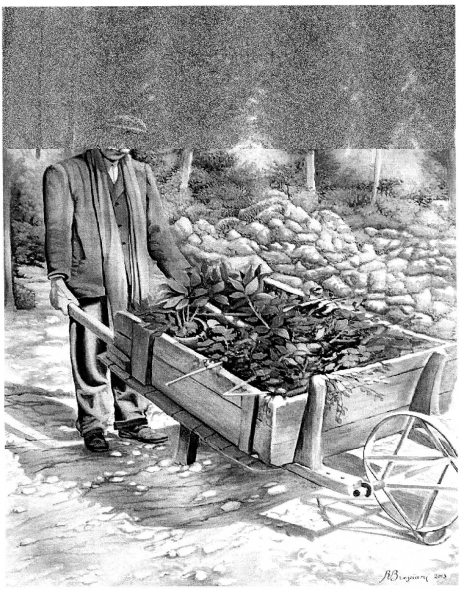
What the Holy Spirit says to the Church with the supreme authority of the Second Vatican Council and with the magisterial guarantee of the Vicar of Christ, the same divine Spirit tells us with the humble life of this true and faithful Servant of God. To the

Heavenly Father, from whom every good gift descends, goes our praise and our thanks.

Msg. Giuseppe Amari,
Bishop of Verona.



"*As Jesus started on his way,*
a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him.
"Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"
"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered.
"No one is good—except God alone.
You know the commandments:
'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery,
you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony,
you shall not defraud, honour your father and mother."
"Teacher," he declared,
"all these I have kept since I was a boy."
Jesus looked at him and loved him.
"One thing you lack," he said.
"Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.
Then come, follow me."
But these words made him sad because he had a lot of wealth"
(MK 10:17-21).



Francis Perez,
knew heroically to abandon
the baton of Earl, title of Advocate and sold all his
estates to follow Jesus Christ,
and lived among the poor
“the Good Children” of Fr. Calabria.
And he lived serene, in peace and satisfied.

THE CHOICE

December 1907. In a modest and hidden house, in the alleyway of ‘Strade Rotte’, on the outskirts of Verona, the lively voices of a small group of energetic children, who were once wandering along the street, torn apart from poverty and misery is in those days quenched.

On the ground floor, in a bare room, dimly lit by an oil lamp, four friends sit at a table and argue animatedly: Fr. John Calabria, Fr. Natale of Jesus, Fr. Diodato Desenzani and the lay Earl Francis Perez.

The scene and the speeches are strange and incomprehensible to the ears of the profane. A rich Earl who insistently pleads with the humble and poor priest John Calabria to be accepted as his collaborator in the education and formation of his young boys.

"*Fr. John, why do you insist on refusing my help to assist and educate these poor orphaned and abandoned children*?" asks lawyer Francis Perez, an Earl among the nobles and rich in all levels.

Yet in that house there was so much need for generous and capable people who could assist those children, who are accustomed to the unbridled freedom of the street and lacking in the most elementary education.

For some years now the Earl has been insisting on his friend priest, but he does not give in to the temptation to count him among his

collaborators. To him, who had abandoned himself totally in the arms of divine Providence, seemed to be wrong to the Lord, if he accepted a man who would give him some economic security.

A few years later, on August 20, 1909, the Earl again insisted on his request:

"*So, because do I have four coins, I cannot dedicate myself to the Lord, to serve Him in his poorest children?*

There was an obstacle that in Fr. Calabria seemed undefeatable: that man was rich, he was cultured, he occupied an enviable social position, Deputy Magistrate of the Court of Verona. All titles that in Fr. Calabria seemed to be fighting with the style of poverty, and heroically evangelical, that he had chosen for himself and for the Opera. Welcoming in his circle a rich man seemed to him to be wrong to the divine Providence, which was to be the exclusive support of his Institute. To solve the rambling problem, intervened the Carmelite Father Natale, confessor of both, indicating the solution to the Earl, Francis Perez:

"*If he truly wants to serve God in the "House of Good Children" sell what you have, and the proceeds give to the poor and so, poor among the poor, certainly Fr. Calabria will welcome you."*

And that generous and spiritually well-prepared soul, sold all his possessions and the proceeds he placed at the availability of Fr. Calabria for the purchase and renovation of the House of San Zeno in Monte. Free from all material possession, with a small and poor personal outfit, he presented himself to his priest friend to ask the "*charity to be accepted as a Poor Servant to the abandoned children*".

There was no longer the rich estate owner, nor the brilliant lawyer. The Earl "is dead!" to those who still called him with that honorific title; there is only one modest and poor brother Francis. Many people in the aristocratic world of Verona, at the news of his choice, shook their heads in disbelief and unable to understand, but others said: *"Do you want to see the miracles of the Lord? Go to San Zeno in Monte and you will find a rich man who has been able to dispose of all that he had to serve God in his poor."*

CHAPTER ONE

LINEAGE OF PEREZ

THE FAMILY

The surname of the House of Francis, perhaps, comes from "**Pere**" (now Peri), small village in the canton of Sarrola - Carcopino, not far from Ajaccio, Corsica, an island that depended on the Republic of Genoa.

"FROM PERE" TO VENEZIA

By sifting through the State Archives of Venice, we find that such Lorenzo Dalle Pere, at the beginning of the XVII century, moved to Venice, to serve the Serenissima.

For his loyalty and military valour in defending Venetian possessions from the constant assaults of the Turks, he gained fame, honours and wealth.

Historian Renzo Piglialepre, of Zevio, gives another version "The ancient house, perhaps from the Spanish roots, is remembered by historians already in the century. II. [...].

In 1600, some Perez were in the service of Venice and the King of France; in the same century Giacinto and Francis first settled in Verona, where from 1653 to 1682, the family is described in the Campione dell' Estimo, in contrada della Fratta. Also, in 1682, Giacinto Perez obtained from Maria Giovanna of Nemours, advisor of Savoy, the title of Earl, transferable to the successors. In the following centuries some members of the family continued military traditions, but they also distinguished themselves by religious, cultural activities, and for participation in the political events of the time.

In Zevio, the Perez shall definitely own since 1639, the year as D. Ant has mentioned. And, an M. Piero Perez in 1823 lived in the former stone throw distance at the palace of Via Meneghini. Meanwhile, as early as 1744, the House certainly had possessions even in Bosco Zevio, including the oratory.

As large landowners and major taxpayers, the Perez participated in the right to administrative and political life, according to the laws of the time; certain Francis Perez was an officer in the civil state of the City of Zevio in 1807; Antonio Maria Nicolò Perez (1821-1890), a lawyer and judicial prosecutor, he was mayor of Zevio and, during his tenure, promoted, among other things, the construction of the iron bridge and the parish of Bosco.

Finally, Earl Francis (1861-1937), son of the previous, lived for many years in Zevio, before becoming religious of the Opera, Fr. Calabria ...".

SOCIO POLITICAL SITUATION OF ZEVIO

Zevio, in the plains of Verona, in the right of Adige river, is today a municipality of more than twelve thousand inhabitants. The place was inhabited since Prehistoric times. In the Middle Ages and until the post-war period, the territory, abundantly irrigated, produced huge sorts of cereals, wine, fodder and rice. Mulberry and sugar beet were also grown on a large scale.

The cottage industry in the manufacture of hoof wood and even more, so that of wicker baskets for the use of industry and agriculture was also notable. Adige was also a source of wealth; there was a prodigious amount of gravel that was transported as far as Polesine for road maintenance.

Then, passed the cyclone of the last war, but the cyclone of an economic and cultural revolution that marked the end of an era,

when, even here as elsewhere, the inhabitants lived almost all with field work.

Crafts and commercial activities of a certain weight were born and developed: those activities that after the exodus of many local population to more industrialized centres of the city of Verona (and its crown) allowed an economic revival.

Zevio gave birth to Saint Toscana. This woman married at very young age with Alberto Occhi di Cane. Becoming a widow, she withdrew from the world, leading a life of prayer. She settled at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Verona. She then spent the rest of her life assisting the sick at the nearby hospital as a nun of the Jerusalemites Order of Malta. In July 1343, at about fifty years old, Toscana died.

The continuous miracles and the increased veneration of the Verona citizen who flocked in crowds to pray at her tomb, immediately convinced the ecclesiastical authority to transport the remains of the saint inside the church of the Holy Sepulchre: the solemn transference took place on the September 29, 1343, with the placement of the sacred deposit in the marble ark that also currently houses the venerated bones.

Toscana was declared a saint to the furrow of the people, that is, without particular canonical processes. From her church - called St. Toscana - the devotion extended throughout the diocese of Verona: altars dedicated to her and sacred images depicting her appearance are found in many churches of the Argo-Verona.

In 1832, a marble column with a statue of St. Toscana was erected in the square of Zevio. Her feast was scheduled for July 14.

THE "DALLE PERE" AT VERONA

At the end of xvii century the brothers Giacinto and Francis, nephews of Lorenzo Dalle Pere, got established in Verona, in the palace of Dal Ben, not far from Castelvecchio.

The elder brother, Jacinto, was the "Captain" of the force at Rovigo and Legnago. In 1660, as "Commanding officer", he defended heroically the island of Candia, where he remained wounded.

Returned to Verona, the citizens attributed to him honours and wrote about him in the "golden book" of the city, together with his brother Francis.

Three years later, the Governor of Savoy, Maria Giovanna Battista of Nemours, had conferred them the title 'Earl' transferable to the successors.

"VERONESI EASTER"
(17 April 1797)

Between 1796 and 1797, Verona became once again in the midst of assault and war. On June 1, 1796 about 12000 French soldiers entered Verona and chased away the Austrians.

Two days later Napoleon, accompanied by numerous generals and 500 Knights, sabotaged the city, occupying the houses of Nobles, and the public places. He immediately demanded substantial contributions and food for his countless troops. Two months later, Napoleon had to dislodge from the city for the arrival of the Austrian army. The euphoria of those who welcomed the Austrian liberating army soon died out. On 7 August the Austrians had to withdraw from the city. The next day, the French came again, who ransacked, disrespecting churches and convents.

The Austrian army tried several times to return to Verona, but was defeated first at Arcole and then in Rivoli.

The population watched in shock at these continuous passages of foreign armies, in an ill-conceived silence and growing disgust, brooding in their hearts the desire to shake off all these leech armies.

On April 17, 1797 (the second day of Easter), when they reached the limit of endurance, the Verona citizens rose up against the Napoleonic troops. The bells to hammer, as they are called, men and young people from all walks of life who, in more or less large groups, began the hunt for the French. Violence spared no one.

Earl Antonio Maria Perez also participated in the uprising and, leading a volunteer corps of peasants, who had gathered at Campagnola, led them to the assault of San Felice Castle, where the French had stormed. After a week of battles and clashes on the streets and around the Castles, the uprising was suppressed on April 25, 1797, with the encirclement of the city by 15,000 French soldiers.

The surrender had heavy consequences for Verona, which suffered raids of works of art and goods. Smothered in blood the uprising of the Verona, many patriots to escape the death penalty, took refuge abroad.

The two brothers, Giovanni Battista and Antonio Perez, also fled, finding political asylum in Tyrol. Their palace was set on fire in retaliation. The memory of this event remained in the name "Piazzetta Burned Houses" (today "Piazza Pasque Verona").

CHAPTER TWO

FAMILY TREE

FRANCIS' GRADFATHER EARL JOHN BAPTIST PEREZ

Returning to their homeland, the two brothers engaged in the reconstruction of the city and the organization of public affairs.

Earl Giovanni Battista Perez (1778 - 1852), a cultured man and austere regalia, during Austrian rule, held public office, "for the good of the city, keeping in his Italian heart the hope of redemption and an awakening of the national consciousness. When he had fled Verona, to follow the fortunes of his brother Antonio, with all the other patriots from Verona, he was just 19 years old.

At about 37 years old, Earl John the Baptist married to the Marquis Elena Montanari. After the marriage, the couple decided to forgo all worldly feasts, to devote themselves to the education of their children.

The result was a brood of eight children, all focused on to a coherently Christian life. Among these, in addition to the father of Francis, deserve special mention, Fr. Luigi Perez, priest of the Congregation of Filippni, and Fr Paolo Perez, of the Congregation of Charity, founded by Fr. Antonio Rosmini. The widowed daughter Marianna also entered the convent of Visitandine.

Fr. Luigi Perez (1826-1895), Francis' uncle, after giving up his possessions for the construction of the Institute building and the parish activities, chose priestly life. He became a religious of the Congregation of the Oratorians, and pastor of the Filippini in Verona. A strong and effective speaker, he was often invited to give lectures and retreats to seminary students, clerics and high school students. His notebooks of his preaching notes were donated to Fr. Calabria by his nephew Francis Perez.

Fr. Paul Perez, (1822-1879). Teacher, poet, writer, holy priest, highly educated. Joshua Carducci gave this definition of him: "*He was a great Catholic philosopher, who took refuge from the delineations and from the tyranny of Austria, he saved himself in theology, composing the most beautiful commentary of ecclesiastical school learning known in Italy*". He was an ardent patriot and for this he was persecuted for his feelings of Italianism.

The eight son of Duke Giobatta was Duke Antonio Maria Nicolò, father of Francis.

CHAPTER THREE

FERVENT PARENTS

FRNACIS' FATHER DUKE ANTONIO MARIA NICOLÒ PEREZ

Duke Antonio Maria Nicolò Perez (1821-1890), Graduate in law. He practiced law in Verona.

In 1851, at the age of 30, he married the Countess Anna Da Lisca, and they had ten children.

He held prestigious positions in the civil community: Attorney General, Mayor of Zevio, public prosecutor of Verona, Provincial Councillor and Dean of the Directorate of Pious Places in the city.

In 1871, following the renunciation of the Marquis Ottavio Canossa, he was elected deputy to the Italian Parliament, as a representative of the moderate liberals, for which the Catholics also

voted. However, two years later, he resigned, not feeling at ease in that legislative hall where an anticlerical air was blowing.

He accepted the office of Pro-Mayor of Verona, to avoid the city under commissioner management. Duke Antonio was an exceptional man, with human gifts and the gift of the Christian faith, inherited from his fathers.

For his merits he was made a great officer of the Order of the Saints Maurizio and Lazzaro.

In political life he suffered greatly, feeling torn between sincere love for the homeland and the difficulty of accepting a certain patriotism mixed with anti-clericalism. As mayor of Zevio, he left as a memorial of his administration the bridge over the Adige (Perez Bridge) and the church of Bosco di Zevio.

On his death on January 4, 1890, the Mayor of Verona, in the funeral oration, recalled: "*The Earl Antonio Perez [...] everywhere and always left indelible foot prints of intrepid honesty, integrity of character, tireless and intelligent assiduity, conversant industriousness, for which he was reputed, and was, a skilled administrator of public heritage and that of the poor, and now Verona, appreciative: yes, o gentlemen! Verona is grateful, Verona points you out as an example of self-denial and writes your name in the pages of our history, among the most well-deserved fellow citizens*".

SOCIO-POLITICAL, NATIONAL SITUATION

The year in which Francis was born was a critical period for national life: proclamation of the kingdom of Italy, political and anti-clerical struggles, social upheavals.

On March 17, 1861, the Kingdom of Italy was formed, following the annexation to the Kingdom of Sardegna of the Habsburg, Papal and Bourbon territories. Verona was still under the Austrian rule, but many, especially among the young students, harboured a feeling of Italianism. Even some priests, such as Fr Paolo Perez, felt a strong call for the unity of Italy. For this reason, each institution was kept under control for suspicion of love for the Kingdom of Italy. Schools, parishes, associations were heavily audited and inspected.

Unfortunately, the feelings of Italianism, for many silly people, were also seasoned with banal anticlericalism; for this reason, many Catholics and sincere patriots were subjected to harassment both from the Habsburg side and from the Italian patriots.

On October 16, 1866, a body of riflemen, entered through Porta Vescovo and settled in the city. A plebiscite was announced on October 21 which sanctioned the union of Verona to the Kingdom of Italy. Membership was total.

At the end of the century saw, Verona and the surrounding areas subject to disastrous floods in the Adige, which convinced the Government to build mighty drains and the closure of the secondary branch of the dead water in the city and create areas of flooding outside the city. Famines and political struggles upset the tranquillity

of a population, which for so long had passively endured every foreign government.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESTLESS CHILDHOOD

FRANTIC CECCHINO

Antonio Perez and the Marquise Anna Da Lisca, had gotten ten children from their marriage, out of which three died at an early age.

Our Francis, the fifth of the broods, was born on July 9, 1861, in Via Leoncino 11, in the heart of old and aristocratic Verona. Two days later, he was baptized in the parish of Saints Fermo and Rustico. He inherited the name Francis, in memory of an uncle who died tragically in a shipwreck in the waters of Lake Garda, and the name Maria, as a sign of the Perez family's filial devotion to the Madonna.

His father Antonio communicated this fifth happy event to the Rosminian brother Fr. Paul Perez: *"I grew up in the number of children. [...] Two months ago I had the fifth child, fourth among the living, for him I renewed the name of our unfortunate brother Francis. Here is the popular teaching to care getting ready with more and more, and especially in difficult times. However, I am happy both with the nature and the health of them my children, so I hope the Lord wants to bless me*".

Francis, informally called Cecchino, spent his childhood happily relaxed in the noisy and festive brood of his brothers. The family environment was deeply religious. According to his grandfather Giobatta, "*faith is passed from the father's marrow to that of his children*", therefore, from childhood, Francis absorbed the virtue and the religious sense of life from a family atmosphere.

An ideal family, where harmony and understanding between parents and the warm and sincere affection among children reigned.

Up to the age of seven, everything took place at home, even the study of the first rudiments of reading and writing, imparted by a private instructor.

To continue their studies, the parents sought an Institute that would combine culture and moral and Christian formation. After consulting with his uncle Fr. Paul, they decided to put their two minor children, Cecchino and Cesarino, as boarders in the Royal College "Carlo Alberto" of Moncalieri (TO), frequented by the children of the nobles of Piedmont, Lombardy, and Venetian families, where the eldest son Giobatta was already a boarder. The college was secular, but was directed with seriousness and wisdom by the Barnabite Fathers. The Moncalieri College was founded by Carlo Alberto and inaugurated on November 3, 1838. He assigned the Barnabite Fathers to own and manage. Land and buildings were donated by Carlo Alberto to the Barnabites in 1837. With the Royal Decree of July 7, 1866, the religious Orders were suppressed and the goods forfeited. The College ownership was passed to the State, and it was donated it to the Municipality of Moncalieri on (September 28, 1868). The Municipality committed to continue the educational activity,

entrusted itself to the Barnabites who ever since had to pay the rent. Father Teppa, the Rector, said: "*A piece of bread and a piece of land on which to kneel to pray will never fail us"*. The Barnabites never ceased to direct and educate. The College was repurchased by the Barnabites in 1927, thanks to the effort of Father Palma, the Rector, who pressed Mussolini with skill and energy, obtaining his consent in a discussion with the Duke at Pabono, Venice

The day of departure to join the hostel was set for April 12, 1869, but due to a series of illnesses disturbing the two children, hence the departure was delayed.

At first, Cesarino had suddenly fallen ill. He got recovered, but remained physically very weak, and he always lived thus till the end of his earthly life, at a very young age, that is just of thirty-two. Then the illness fell to little Cecchino, who was hit by lung infection, with violent fever, so as to fear the worst. He also got healed, but he carried the consequences throughout his life.

"CARLO ALBERTO" MONCALIERI BOARDING

Finally, on October 18, 1869, after having spent a moderate regaining, the two children were accompanied to the boarding of Moncalieri. Cecchino was eight just years old.

At the beginning, Cecchino inserted himself quite well in the school and boarding life, even if he suffered from the detachment from the family. Of course, his father Antonio and mother Anna also suffered greatly from this detachment from their children, but the

choice of this Institute, which enjoyed an excellent reputation, had become necessary to provide the children with a healthy education and a weighty and serious culture. In this boarding school, Cecchino will attend the last three years of elementary school and the first and second grammar school.

Their father Antonio wrote to his brother Fr. Paul: "*I placed Cesarino and Francis in the school boarding of Moncalieri, having seen the good result obtained by Giovannino (eldest son). You can't imagine how much this detachment costs to me and Annetta! Two, at one time, would seem too much; but any sacrifice is never too much, intended for the best results of the children* ".

Keep in mind that there was an iron rule in this Institute: once you entered, you only came out with a complete school cycle (about ten years). The concession for family holidays began only in 1906, but our Francis remained in the boarding school less time, from 1869 to 1874. Even visits from parents to children in the boarding school could be counted on the fingers of one hand.

Our modern sensibility hardly manages to understand and approve the strict choice of these parents and the strict rule of certain Institutes for children and young people. In "Carlo Alberto" boarding there was an iron regulation that allowed no exceptions. According to the description of a former boarder, the timetable was almost military:

At half past five wake up [...] at six we entered the chapel [...] then came study until eight. [...] The cold and despondency oppressed us: our pen was freezing and the ink frozen in the inkpots. […] At eight

o'clock large white cups appeared steaming with breadsticks. The morning breakfast we had in silence. [...] Then we went up to the top floor for school [...]. At eleven o'clock recreation, at half past eleven, another very short study, then in the dormitory to wash our hands and proceed to the upper room to have lunch. Once the dinner was over, the most carefree hubbub echoed in the enormous building. With the blink of the touch of 12.30, we went to study the lessons for the afternoon school. At four o'clock we went out for a snack (an orphaned loaf, without the accompaniment of any delicacy). From five to eight the imposing study of the evening [...]. At eight dinner. As soon as the Vice-Rector said "speak", then we warmed up by chatter. Eventually everyone went to bed (Vico D'Arisbo, When I was in boarding school).

Our Cecchino had to face many difficulties to fulfil all those rather heavy regulations for a child still at a tender age, in contrast to the education he had received in the family. Moreover, due to the after-effects of the disease he was affected, any climatic variation had an impact on his bronchial tubes and nervous system with gastroenteritis. And it affected his studies. Cecchino could not arise from mediocrity. His mother Lady Anna, in a writing to her brother-in-law Don Paolo, attributed these poor results to his liveliness and playful nature.

“I saw Cecchino - she writes on May 14, 1872 - is still too lively and distracted, so the study lags behind a little, despite the fact that he doesn't lack good readiness”.

Earl Antonio, his father, however, was more confident in a recovery in studies, as the child would grow up: *“Cecchino has no*

great craving for study, but he is docile and good. In the course of time, things will improve".

But his mother Anna, much more worried than her husband, invoked , a valid help of her brother-in-law Fr. Paul to shake the son's indifference: *"Little Francis continued to take the matter of study slightly, always promises new life, but, as the Fr. Cenobio, rector of the boarding, says, nature is stronger than he is. Perhaps his visit and his advice would achieve greater results than those obtained by our exhortations".*

These notes on the lively character of the young Cecchino are awe-inspiring because, whoever later gets to know the religious brother Francis Perez, will testify that he was "the personification of tranquillity, inner peace, gentleness of mind, always the same character, without points of liveliness.

A character so shy was associated with a shyness which made him vulnerable to jokes or unflattering appreciation of his classmates. Unfortunately, even in the so-called schools of Noble children there is no scarcity of biting and teasing towards the weakest, indeed, at times, between them a more subtle and more subtle cruelty than that of the children of the popular schools.

Cecchino was silent and suffered. The presence of his two brothers could not make up for his mother's pats and invigorating affection.

The situation became more serious when his older brother, Giovanni Battista, left the Institute to complete the course of study

elsewhere. As a relief valve to the gloomy and grey atmosphere, the Cecchino occasionally let himself be overcome by his innocent vivacity, and put together boyish jokes to make class hours more tolerable.

Of course, this thoughtlessness was not admitted by the strict rule and did not suit the seriousness of the studies. The educators communicated it to the parents and so, after finishing the second gymnasium, they decided to remove him from Moncalieri to put him under the protection of his uncle Fr. Paul Perez, esteemed scholar and very human educator, teacher in the Rosminian College of Domodossola. Francis' entry into the college of Domodossola took place towards the end of October 1874, where he found himself at ease and breathed a climate of greater serenity.

THE ROSMINIAN BOARDING OF DOMODOSSOLA

Young Francis in November 1874, regularly began the third gymnasium in Domodossola. The parents were happy with this solution and thanked Fr. Paul who agreed to take care of the son.

On November 15, Francis' mother wrote to Fr. Paul, *"I appreciate that Cecchino is well and in a good mood. We hope that going forward will calm his vivacity and think more of the study than the game [...]*

I wish the young John would also spend some time with you, with your guide, studies in a way. [...] Your sister-in-law, Anna".

After a few months, Fr. Paul reassured his parents: *"Francis is doing well; it seems to me that even his face became more vividly coloured in good health in Domo [dossola], despite the winter that is already beginning [...] I bought him a woollen scarph, because, warmed up by the game, he may wrap it around his neck not to suffer from too many changes from hot to cold".*

From reading these unassuming lines, one can immediately notice the atmosphere that was breathed in the new environment where, although demanding seriousness in the study, was not considered necessary to use military methods in the discipline. The almost tender touch of his uncle stands out, who cares about the health of his nephew who wants to avoid relapses in bronchial diseases.

But everyone in the family awaited, with enthusiastic expectation, even more comforting news about the school behaviour of the "lively boy".

His aunt, Lady Lavinia Da Lisca, wrote to Fr. Paul: *"I hope that with your surveillance and incitement, you would also begin to infuse love in studying. Say hello to him on my behalf and make every possible recommendation ".*

Giobatta, aware of his responsibility as the eldest son, recommended his younger brother to his uncle Fr. Paul, hoping that he would finally keep his usual potentials: "*Great realities won't calm down a bit! I want to hope and I have a lot of trust in the closeness of the good uncle who will find a way, with your goodness and experience, to inspire in my brother special love towards study*".

It is nice to discover the reality of these families, where parents and children feel involved and permitted in the spiritual and cultural growth of younger siblings. And it is also stimulating and comforting to think of saints who started from very normal premises, so close to our life experience!

After a few months, as early as January 1875, more consoling news about Francis' academic performance began to reach in the family. *"The latest news on Cecchino - wrote his father Antonio to Fr. Paul – it is relieving to all of us, the hope of a better future. If it is true that he became more committed to his study, I think he will also moderate his liveliness [...] Hello, my dear, give a loving hug for Cecchino to whom I send my fatherly blessing and a thousand of recommendations for the new year"*.

The wise Fr. Paul had been able to correct the child's excessive liveliness and guide him in the exercise of human and Christian virtues. Cecchino, with small steps, began to dominate and love his study. Consequently, he also began to achieve brilliant school results, with an average of 7, even if in the notes of the certificate of the first year of promotion to the fourth gymnasium there was still that perennial note sympathetically out of tune: "Excessive Vivacity ".

At the end of the school year, Fr. Paul suggested his brother Antonio that Francis could enjoy a month's family vacation.

The excellent educator understood that the child, in order to be more spurred on in the study, needed a dose of family affection. And then, this benevolence had to be rewarded.

His father Antonio followed the advice of his brother priest and was satisfied with it. He will communicate thus to Fr. Paul: *"The little Francis has behaved very well, of excellent nature, very affectionate. He also showed that in some encounters he knew how to overcome his overwhelming vivacity. He did some small exercises in his Latin and French and seems willing to get back into the study with added energy"*

Returning to Domodossola, young Francis began the fourth year of high school. From the update obtained from the correspondence between his father Antonio and Fr. Paul, we discover that the boy continued to improve, but Earl Antonio was not satisfied with vague news, he wanted to know from his brother "detailed information on his behaviour over his studies, on his religious practices, on his firmness. Is he improving? Tell me everything! ".

Pressed by these precise questions, Fr. Paul described a complete picture of the adolescent: *"We can only praise ourselves for his goodness and religion: he is always that innocent and naive and affectionate boy as he was. Without human concern, he attends the sacraments every fifteen days; respectful and obedient to his good Prefect who counts him very dear, he does not get into dangerous familiarity with his companions who are now leaving him to himself, nor do they give him any nuisance like last year. And in his studies there is no doubt, he made considerable progress […] He willingly studies, in order to feel the need for play and the company of others and for distraction less strong; I often see him coming to my room to look here and there in my books for something to help him with his compositions".*

As a mitigating factor for Francis' permanent difficulties, Fr. Paul allowed himself to make a negative judgment on the scholastic method of his time: *"The present method, that is the variety of subjects, which is impossible that they all enter into a tender mind, without tiring it and make one mess up. Imagine yourself: prose and poetry, Latin and Italian, Greek, arithmetic, geography and history, compositions, precepts and what I know. [...] When I think of the state in which he was at the beginning of last year, his progress is unbelievable. We can certainly encourage and comfort him this autumn by giving him his entire month of vacation with his good parents whom he loves so much".*

CHAPTER FIVE

PRECIOUS GUIDES

PAUL PEREZ

Paul Perez had a great influence on the moral and spiritual formation of Francis. Perhaps he is the most illustrious figure of the Perez family, for his humanistic culture and holiness of life.

The poet Carducci, noted exactly tender to the ecclesiastics, gave him this definition: *"He was a great Catholic philosopher and took refuge from the deflections and from the Austrian tyranny, was saved in theology, composing the most beautiful commentary on scholastic*

and ecclesiastical science that is well known in Italy. Paul Perez intertwined relationships with many literary figures of his time, even with those who did not share his religious and philosophical ideas. Among his friends we remember: Ferdinando Gregorovius, world-famous German historian, who tried several times to distract him from becoming a religious, "to keep friends, country and himself, very noble man in mind and heart". Cardinal Capecelatro, Dantist Carlo Vitte, Giovanni Cappellini, populariser of paleontological sciences, poet Giacomo Zanella, Nicolò Tommaseo, and many others, both Italians and foreigners.

His friend Carlo Cipolla described him thus: "*He tried to hide the very technical, literary, fiscal knowledge, under simple appearances*".

Paul Perez completed his classical studies in Verona. He enrolled in Law, at the University of Innsbruck, where he took the exams in German, marvelling everyone at the quick and perfect way in which he had learned it. He continued his studies in Pavia and then in Padua. Despite not having yet completed the legal course, he was chosen, after a regular competition, as a teacher of letters, history and geography in the St. Stephan grammar school of Padua. At the beginning of 1850, the Austrian Lieutenancy entrusted him with the chair of Italian literature at the University of Padua. This assignment has taken from him the following years because he was "too friendly" to Italian patriots.

The Austrians searched his home and he was subjected to interrogation. Finally, they confined him to Verona, under surveillance.

Tired of inactivity, he went to Vienna to defend himself against the charges. He was acquitted of all guilt, but suspicions and harassment continued around him. To find peace, he took refuge in the meditated study of the Divine Comedy, of which he thought he would make an aesthetic philosophical comment. The work remained unpublished and he apologized to his cousin Maria Serego Alighieri: "*As soon as the weather shines, I will work out all my best to finish the job. Now I am well under way and all that remains is a bit of quiet to write lucidly and as a good Italian* ".

His health began to give him some trouble. He left teaching and moved to Rome to perfect his studies in Thomistic teachings. Perhaps he was also trying to shake off the heavy Austrian censorship that always kept him under control. He completed Thomistic studies under the guidance of the Dominican Father Guidi. During his stay in Rome, he felt a strong call to the priestly life. He met with Father Bertetti, Procurator General of the Institute the "Sons of Charity" of Antonio Rosmini. After a long and serious reflection, amid the wonder of many friends, he entered the novitiate of the Institute, where he became a religious and, in 1860, he was ordained as priest.

After a period of stay in Rome, he was transferred to Stresa and then, in Domodossola, cradle of the Rosminian Opera, with the task of preparing the publication of Rosmini's works.

Father Paul also knows poetic works, in perfect Dante style. During the period in which Fr. Paul was in Domodossola, Francis Perez was with his as a student. He accompanied him step by step to overcome the critical age of adolescence.

CHAPTER SIX

EXTRAORDINARY UNCLE

HARMONIOUS CULTURAL AND MORAL GROWTH

Francis had found in Domodossola, at his uncle Fr. Paul, the right climate to express all his aptitudes and talents, in full freedom and maturity. Everything seemed to be going at full speed, but here, instead, a grave moral danger appears in ambush. A dangerous net was about to screw the sniper to a circle of vicious companions. Nothing exceptional or pharisaic way scandalous for those who know well the college or military environments, when some buggy element is inserted among the boys or the young recruits.

The innocent curiosity of children and the turbulence of adolescence, at times, can easily become prey to these perceptions, despite the watchful attention of educators. Cecchino, partly out of naivety, a little out of curiosity, crossed only the threshold of evil, quickly withdrawing from it when he perceived the vicious gridlock that was engulfing him. He confided with his uncle and, substantiated as he was by the frequent attendance at the sacraments, and thus he was saved in time.

Uncle Fr. Paul, prudent and wise as he was, played down the incident and dispelled his mother's concerns, comparing Cecchino to one of the child slaves in Babylon: *"Now your dear child looks like one of those three Babylonian children God kept unharmed in the furnace without even a hair feeling the contact of the flame. And that good*

Lord who saved you so admirably, will He not continue his work, will He not bless you even in the future, will you not crown your maternal care with a more fortunate outcome? "

Even the young Francis was not particularly upset. A few years later, in recalling the experience of Domodossola, he thanked his uncle who had always urged him "*to attend the sacraments. That, of course, was what saved me from the comrades' ugliness*."

He saw the evil, evaluated it for what it was, "an ugliness", and rejected it. He was a pure young man, intact but not clumsy. He knew how to react, because he was strongly oriented towards the good and made strong by the grace, obtained through prayer and the sacraments.

But the parents, seriously worried about the moral integrity of their son, decided to withdraw him from the College at Domodossola and to enrol him in the seminary school of Verona, to attend the fourth year of Grammar school.

Young Francis had to do the math repair tests in Domodossola in September 1876, but his parents preferred to have him repeat an academic year, rather than send him back to that hostel.

When young Francis learned that his parents did not want to send him back to the boarding of Domodossola, he wrote to his uncle:

"... I come to you in writing to show you my parents' parade to let me continue my studies in the family. You can imagine how this new situation has produced a significant effect in me: first of all, the

happiness of being in the family, then the regret of abandoning my Superiors who had real concern for me, and so well, trained me. I promise you that I will do what I can to maintain the education I received, as well as practice of the maxims I had in the boarding. I will continue to study that way with which I had begun the past year, in order to procure a great consolation for my parents, who so much cared me with much expenses made for me. I cannot show you my gratitude for the many guidance I received. I remember how I was warmly welcomed by you when I came to see you in your room; how many guidelines, how many teachings you gave me! I could not miss a book, which your concern gave me. But what I especially ought to be grateful to you for is that you so much recommended the frequency of the sacraments. Of course, it was that saved me from the ugliness of my companions".

Starting from this episode, a radical change in the life of the young Francis was noticed. He appeared more mature, more committed to study and more attentive to the exhortations of his parents and of his uncle Fr. Paul.

The serene environment of the Seminary and the closeness of his family members were certainly decisive for the success of his studies. And so, at the end of the school year, he reported the average of eight with honour.

It is interesting to note the maturity the young Francis reached and his freedom of judgment with regard to his professors and the sermons that were given in the seminary. The spiritual growth, the balance and the serenity of mind had made him overcome even the natural shyness.

We like to report his judgment on the sermons that were given during the course of spiritual exercises*:*

“"On Friday we began the spiritual exercises in the seminary. [...] To tell the truth, it was a little boring with those continuous meditations on hell, death, judgment and sin; but yesterday morning after the holy Communion I was really happy”.

And in evaluating his professors, he let himself go to a somewhat spicy, but not malicious, judgment: *"The Italian professor" is a little strange ". The Latin one, very good in his field, "is a little antic, very rigorous in the discipline up to exhalation".* And the sixteen-year-old student was not all wrong. The teacher, in fact, demanded that they treat themselves in perfect Latin arguments, morals, for which it was necessary to memorize all the literary creation of Virgil. From all this, a free character leaps in his judgments and far from accommodating. Yet, that Francis, after many years and a great deal of experience, will become a docile and humble "Poor Servant". He became so not by his natural inclination, but through his deep-rooted virtue; he became so and not out of servility or pusillanimity but by his pure gospel spirituality.

His uncle, answering his letter, good-naturedly gave him a tug of ear for having spoken of boredom in listening to the sermons on the eternal truths, even if in his heart he would have thought that the nephew had a hundred reasons in formulating such an explicit and truthful judgment. Although these themes are part of the spiritual baggage of a Christian, it is more than natural that a young person is

more inclined to look confidently at life that opens up before him and to be encouraged to live it fully, serenely, and joyfully.

One of Perez's first biographers, Cirillo Boscagin, comments*: "During school and high school studies, the timidity and difficulty of expressing himself, had been his cross in the colleges of Moncalieri and Domodossola. Now he knew how to express himself with greater confidence and language properties. He judged the teaching methods of some of his teachers and the events of the time. A sign that he was forming that personality, that despite his simplicity and profound humility, was his unmistakable characteristics.* "

THE DILIGENT AND SERIOUS HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

After completing the Grammar school in Verona seminary, young Francis was enrolled in the State Scipione Maffei High School, the most renowned institute in Verona for its history and fame of its teachers. As a result, he sustained well, but he was not a drudge in adoration of his teachers and obedient in servile submission.

Francis was seventeen years old. He continued to keep contact with his uncle Fr. Paul. Because of the confidence he had with him, he allowed himself to make some criticisms of the teaching method in high school. Here are some examples: *"I can really praise good professors and especially Professor Stegagnini in Italian literature, a topic that is most appealing to me. For the Latin and the Greek, I have Professor G., who showed pleasure in recognizing me as your nephew. He teaches very well, what a pity it is, to tell you here, that no one hears me, he is a little bit strange. He is very rigorous in his discipline up to exaggeration*". Then, instead, of attending this professor more

closely, I found him very affable and very kind to the exams *"more than I would have believed".* Continuing to comb through the correspondence between young Francis and the uncle Fr. Paolo, we see a young man who gradually refined himself, with an attentive and grateful soul.

"Dear uncle," he wrote in Christmas 1878 - *how many times I am delighted in the sweet thought that time in which I enjoyed your dear company and it was comfort and help in my studies; I also remember those beautiful places, to the beauty of which I did not taste then, now I think back with envy. Then I was not lavish with kindness, Rev. Fr Setti, Fr. Calza and all those other good superiors, to whom I do not know how to show my gratitude, I do not pay to have only grateful memory. Certainly, I will have you in my mind and more in my heart you and them in my prayers, I will present you all to the Little Child Jesus in this Christmas feast ".*

His uncle, although overworked and unsteady in health, bursting with joy at seeing how that turbulent boy of the past was maturing in study and in moral and spiritual growth, replied to his nephew: *"The Lord wants to help and bless your studies and , what is more, the happy seeds of virtue, so that you may soon succeed in that fullness and maturity of intellectual and moral education that you, and your parents, may become happy.*

In his last letter, Fr. Paul had expressed the desire to return to Verona *"to witness his progress! Homer, Virgil, Dante! You have chosen good teachers, the best masters in literature ... on my return, it refreshes my memory in me, who for a long time immersed in philosophical things, I have a great thirst for poetry*"

Unfortunately, on September 14, 1879, Fr. Paul died almost suddenly. With the death of this uncle, who had been able to guide him during the most turbulent period of adolescence, written information about young Francis' studies and spiritual ascent is also lost.

We know that the other uncle priest, the Filipino Fr. Luigi Perez, who was in Verona, took over after Fr. Paul as confessor and spiritual director. But written news is lacking and oral testimonials become rarer. So, to probe more deeply into the soul of our young man, shaped by divine grace, we must return to the writings of Fr. Paul.

HE SAW THE EVIL, AND DID NOT LET IT GET IN

In 1814, with the beginning of the Habsburg control, the Lyceum had to quickly adapt to the analogous institutions of the Habsburg Empire. The transformations did not only concern the elimination of Napoleonic eagles and the bust of Napoleon, replaced with that of Francis 1 the Roman Emperor, but also the suppression of military exercises. The school policy of Austria, which is not without its positive aspects, imposed on professors and learners a strict conformism on the subject of values: the school has to form faithful subjects, ready to obey the laws of the state and to honour the emperor who represents it.

In terms of educational organization, the extension of the overall course of studies to eight school years should be mentioned, the emphasis on religious education with related "practices of piety", French language is replaced by German, the suppression of the boarding schools and the steady introduction of the study of Italian

language and literature. In any case, the fundamental orientation remains unchanged: the humanities maintain their primacy, even if, continuing a trend already present in the French period, scientific studies retain a highly respected role.

In 1866, with the entry of Italian troops to Verona, the imposition of Francis I, disappeared and the emperor's portraits were replaced by those of Vittorio Emanuele. But the change was not only external, but also concerning the school curriculum.

Religious teaching was radically reduced to the point of disappearing altogether, as well as the "practices of piety" so much cared for previously. The teaching staff was exclusively laity: in the first "Italian" school year, out of thirteen professors, eight were clergymen. In less than twenty years they became a small minority and by 1883 they were two out of sixteen. Instead, as in the Napoleonic period, military-gymnastic exercises came back into trend.

The Liceo Maffei from "Imperial Royal Grammar High School" was called "Regio Liceo Scipione Maffei".

In 1882, on the occasion of the death of Garibaldi, the pupils of the "Maffei", among whom the young Mario Todeschini, future exponent of the Verona socialism, stood out for the patriotism with which they commemorated him. In the pages of a "unique number" published by them, they do not hesitate to compare the hero to Jesus: "a truly divine man, like the Humble One of Nazareth, Garibaldi wanted to be called Pastor".

Beyond these anticlerical controversies, the life of the Higher Secondary School continued to develop on a cultural level with characters unlike those of the Austrian period. The Spartan and selective school, still enjoyed considerable prestige, which contrasted singularly with the material difficulties due to the poverty of means.

Francis (or Cecchino) had already passed the period of adolescence, a rather turbulent time for every boy. We know that this period of life involves contradictions, emotions, defeats and victories before we can achieve sexual and emotional balance. How did Cecchino live it?

We would like to describe this period of Francis' life, using the exhaustive picture that is made by biographer Fr. Carlo Sempreboni, official witness to the *Process*:

"*Francis, at this age, was an intelligent and normal boy. He felt deeply the family affections and was generously open to appreciation to those who did him good. A sensitive soul, he thanked, prayed, committed himself to duty, as if to repay his debt to those who had done so much for him. He showed concern about the expenses his parents had to pay for him and wanted to find ways to reward them. He could not miss some disturbance. But the closeness of an attentive educator like Fr. Paolo, who informed him and gradually educated him, helped him to overcome and remain free from the storms of the nature.*

At fifteen he was surrounded by dangers and his uncle and parents measured the seriousness. But the alarm of relatives seemed excessive. In fact, the boy was not very upset, he did not accept morbid invitations. Surely the warm family affection, the dedication

of parents on their educational task, the presence, in the family, of a good mixture of brothers and sisters greatly favoured the harmonious development of his personality.

His uncle's letters were very helpful, never showing alarm. Fr. Paul insisted on the memory of eternal truths, on the frequency of the sacraments and on the prayer of confidence and friendship to God. One never finds in the letters of Fr. Paul "*Look out here, be careful there*", as if to suppose the nephew as a poor ignorant wandering about in the minefields. He trusted and encouraged. No mention of psychological terrorism. Wise education.

"And then, did Francis pass youth and adolescence without any experience or fall? Stopping to consider the voluminous correspondence between nephew and uncle, it seems that we should prudently say that he was immune and lucky.

The confidence with his uncle was so great and without inhibitions, that if there had been anything, he would find traces of it, perhaps in the form of "resurrection" after the evil committed. Instead, there is no mention.

At sixteen he did his first spiritual exercises. Usually, the first spiritual exercises of life produce strong impressions. The preacher then put it all to us to tread the hand on the terrible themes of hell, of death, and of divine judgment.

If there had been something serious, or perceived as such, in the previous life of Francis, these sermons would have terrified him and upset him, instead, they have "bored him". He does not mention the

usual general confession, which is very timely if some sense of guilt had upset him. Instead nothing. He only refers to the joy he experienced in the concluding Holy Communion.

Returning, then, to the letters of uncle, we never find reminders to be warned by the "bad companions". Fr. Paul, before Francis confided to him the temptation to which he had been asked, expressed himself with his brother Antonio in an appreciative manner: *"Of his goodness we cannot but praise ourselves; he is always the innocent and simple and affectionate child who was: he attends the sacraments every fortnight (according to the custom of the time); respectful and obedient to his Prefect who loved him very much. He does not gather in dangerous familiarity with his companions, who now leave him to himself, nor give him more harassment like last year". He is a naive adolescent, yes; but not ignorant. The harassment was probably a mockery of his obedience, piety and disgust to bad words and bad taste*".

CHAPTER SEVEN

GRADUATE BARRISTER

YOUNG ADVOCATE FRANCIS

In 1880, after completing his high school diploma with good grades, Francis enrolled in the Law faculty of the University of Padua.

He was staying with his relatives, with the Dukes in the city of Padua. He attended his devotions at the small Marian Sanctuary *Santa Maria della Stua*.

Always using the study of Sempreboni, let's try to get to know the university environment of that time:

“Entering the lively university world, then agitated by political turmoil, put to the test on the beautiful and serene Christian formation of Francis.

The climate was far from constructive. The serious social problems, with scandalous disparities between the capitalists without brakes and hungry workers, the breath of those who subverted and tried to take advantage of those injustices to aggravate bloody struggles and hatred of class, the furious waves of rationalism and materialism that had also accompanied the generous concerns of the Unity of Italy, days of strikes, authoritarian reactions,

open struggle to the faith of the fathers, foolish boastings of a science that fed on false security, all this boiled up as in a boiling crucible in the university environment.

We have no evidence that Francis was excessively troubled by that confusion of opinions and grim solitary coups put in place not only by thoughtless students, but sometimes by imprudent professors, who seemed to hold Jupiter's lightning in their hands; thunderous and deluded by too easy applause and by columns of foolish talk of newspapers.

Freemasonry, covered or uncovered, assisted as a powerful director. The foul-mouthed pornography, the blasphemous and vociferous propaganda of empty brains, equipped with iron nozzles and deafening sounding boxes, could have stunned even the most prepared Christians, who usually did not fail.

And it was not their purely defensive work. Small but belligerent Catholic circles arose here and there, attentive not only to the purity of sound doctrine, but also to the various needs of the poor and the demands of justice.

We do not have much news of Francis about this period. We know that he was staying with relatives and not in the university campus, but it is certain that he did not live outside the battle. Already the example of his father, involved in politics and already adamant consciousness, might have been a very specific reference point for him.

He studied, prayed, and fought with his best companions, but he never wavered. He lived his time and allowed himself to be involved in the problems of that hour, without pulling back, and under the influence of the ideological earthquakes in which he was immersed, criticizing the essay criterion and truth. Even juridical studies, which favour reflection and the search for the right, helped him."

After completing four years of university, he happily supported special exams on all the subjects required. Debated the thesis on the "*Royal prerogative in the changes of the Ministry".*

On November 19, 1885, he was awarded with the degree and proclaimed a doctor of law. The degree certificate, framed and hung on the wall by order of Fr. Calabria, was one of the few things that Brother Francis kept in his poor room.

A BARRISTER, AT THE AGE OF 24.

Returning to Verona, he practiced law for a short period. He remembers that his first case was the defence of a poor woman, accused of stealing a chicken.

Gradually, he abandoned that profession, to which he did not feel any aptitude, and he devoted himself completely to the administration of family assets.

Earl Perez owned palaces in the city of Verona and in the countryside and lots of fertile lands in many Municipalities of the

Province: in Zevio, Persacco, Bosco di Zevio, Ronco, Cerea, Aselogna, Casaleone, Negarine and Illasi, almost all rented.

On January 4, 1890, his father Earl Antonio Maria died, and the care of all possessions, by explicit assignment of his brothers, fell completely over his shoulders.

Because of his recognized honesty and ability, he also became administrator of the Sisters of the Holy Family, named, Teresa, and of other religious Congregations. He did it scrupulously and at free of cost.

The patrimony of the rich Perez family grew with the legacy left by Earl Antonio Pompei, the last descendant of that noble family. In the city, Earl Pompeii had a palace, in Via Cavour, in the aristocratic area of the city.

In 1896, also the Marquise Anna Da Lisca, holy mother of Francis Perez, died. From this moment the life of Francis changed radically. The young man was 35 years.

“WHAT IS IN YOUR MIND TO DO EARL?”

During the period of (1890 - 1900) the Perez family was one of the first families of Verona for wealth, esteem and nobility: all its members tried to maintain the decorum of the Nobility.

Francis' sisters competed in pomp, always with the latest fashion, while the brothers did not give up participating in the city's social life. And Francis was no less.

Young, lawyer, rich and sympathetic, lively and almost handsome, he raised many questions in the vast circle of true nobility, especially in the ladies who sought a proper marriage for themselves or for their daughters.

Francis was tall, lean person, with too splendid fashionable moustaches, always elegant in dress and noble in the lineament. He didn't mind the news of the time: he was among the first to run around Verona at the turn of the velocipede, the bicycle of the time, with the enormous wheel in front and tiny one rear in perfect sporting grip.

Nor was he lacking in the gatherings and receptions in use among the noble families, brilliant but not fatuous, anything but complex due to the presence of fascinating and gaseous young girls, but supremely free from redness and palpitations. They found him: very courteous, complacent, pleasant companion in conversation, but nothing more. What will happen to him?

Genuine curiosity, all the more so because of the fame of an excellent young and desirable party, mingled with well-founded gossiping of incredible strangeness, not to mention even overindulgence.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LIFELONG FRIENDSHIP

SPIRIRUAL FRIENDSHIP WITH THE YOUNG JOHN CALABRIA

After the death of his father, Francis left the house on Via Leoncino and went to occupy the first floor of Palazzo Pompei with his sisters who were still unmarried. The palace, which then took the name of Pompei-Perez, overlooks Corso Cavour, within the parish of the Holy Apostles. The archpriest was his former professor of letters, Don Giacomelli, with whom he had great esteem. In this church, Francis did his devotions and made his large donation for the charitable work of Don Giacomelli who had founded the institute "Le nostra Bambine", for the abandoned girls. And there he also exercised his apostolate as a member of the "Youth Club" and a member of the "Saint Vincent de Paul".

Soon, Francis began to frequent the beautiful church of St. Lorenzo, located in the same street, finding that more comfortable and tranquil. This church was also known to Francis for another reason: the restoration work, decided by the rector, with the contribution of the noble families of the neighbourhood, was directed by the Marquis Da Lisca, a relative of Francis. Rector of the church, since 1886, was Don Pietro Scapini, a Seminary teacher, first in literatures and then in mathematics.

The ancient Church, a jewel of Roman art, had been disfigured over the centuries by elevations that had hidden its primitive face. The same women's galleries had been walled up to make them accommodations for the victims, after the flood of the Adige in 1882.

Near the Church, a beautiful oratory flourished, frequented by the boys, mostly very poor, of the neighbourhood. The young Calabria, under the guidance of the zealous rector Fr. Scapini, was preparing privately for the entrance examinations for the first high school in the seminary. His afternoons were busy for those kids. He had them play and pray and gave them catechism. He trained them as altar servers. He had cultivated a priestly vocation in his heart and greatly loved the decorum of the church and the solemnity of the ceremonies. When the boys left the oratory to return home, the young Calabria lingered for a long time to pray alone. Earl Francis also stopped to pray in the same church ...

The economic conditions of the young Calabria were certainly not unknown to Francis, and there he got to know him better for his piety, his composure in religious services, and his tenderness with the boys. The noble Perez was twelve years older than Calabria, but this did not prevent a wonderful friendship from between them.

Among the boys that the young Calabria assisted and prepared for the liturgical service as altar servers, there was also a boy of 13 years, of a German nationality and of Protestant denomination, son of a shoemaker. He knew that his son was fond of the young Calabria, but he did not suspect that he participated in catechism and even in religious services. One Friday in Lent, the way of the cross was celebrated in the rectory of St. Lawrence. The boy, with his good

dress, followed the priest seriously, with a candlestick in his hand. Mr. Friedmann, the boy's father, perhaps suspecting something, came to the church door and peered inside. The boy, as soon as he saw his father, threw the candlestick to the ground and fled to the sacristy, slipping out through a secondary door. He ran home and waited for his father to return. For many days, the boy did not show up; then quietly resumed attending the oratory again.

MEETING WITH THE YOUNG ORESTE JOHN CALABRIA

The rich Earl, Advocate Francis Perez, meeting with the poor seminarian and later on priest, John Calabria, was important for both. This encounter sparked the trigger of a spiritual friendship, which materialized in a project of life in common, for the good of so many poor and abandoned children.

We do not intend to present the biography of John Calabria completely, but briefly mention the personal stories of John Calabria and the meetings with Perez.

John Oreste Calabria was born in Verona on October 08, 1873, in a building located in Vicolo Disciplina, a side street of Corso Cavour.

On February 28, 1886 he was orphaned by his father. He had to abandon primary school, which he attended at the Stigmatine fathers; to work in a fancy goods shop.

The money received he delivered punctually to his mother, to contribute to the scanty economic revenues.

He stayed at this junk dealer for a couple of years, until he suffered an injury. One day, in the back room of the shop, a smack and shattered place, an angry noise rang out: "*But go to be a priest, because you are not good to anything else!*".

Of course, that time John had done big. He was framing a client's diploma. Inattentively, the little picture that fell to the ground shattered the glass and irretrievably smeared the diploma with ink. For this he was dismissed; and he went home in tears…

With his work apron bundled under his arm, he headed home, thinking of the displeasure he would cause his mother. He entered the house quietly, head down. Angela, his mother was ironing. Seeing him come home so soon, she whispered. She placed the iron on a stone and peered curiously at the boy. He honestly told her what had happened. He looked down, expecting a lecture with flakes. Instead, the loving mother stiffened caringly and sadly. She also knew well that her son wanted to become a priest and, from many small signs, it was clear to her that was his true vocation.

"*I always thought of becoming a priest,*" confided Fr. Calabria to his religious. He was certainly not driven to this mission because he was an idler or a good for nothing, looking for a comfortable accommodation.

For him the priesthood was something connatural, a garment that fell on his skin and, for this reason, all the other activities remained

foreign to him. He had to become a priest, he felt it intimately. However, how to do it?

To become a priest, it was necessary to study, to have money for the tuition in the seminary and for the purchase of books and, above all, to renounce to that small but useful economic help through his work.

That same evening, his mother Angela Foschio, (1831- 1908) went to the parish church and confided to her parish priest. He recommended this to the friend, Fr. Pietro Scapini, rector of the church of St. Lorenzo and professor of mathematics in the seminary. Angela Foschio, was an orphan of her mother and had been placed in the Don Mazza Institute when she was very young (at the age of six). Meanwhile, her father had remarried Merlo Angela. In 1852 the young Angela Foschio completed her internship at the Don Mazza Institute. She left, and a few years later, on April 06, 1856, she married the widower Calabria Luigi.

Fr. Pietro Scapini already knew the young John, because he had him every day as an altar boy. He promised that he would take special interest in the boy.

For three years, the good Fr. Scapini gave the boy private lessons, until he found him sufficiently ready to admit him to the entrance exams for the seminary high school. John passed the exams.

He was accepted at the seminary school and began with difficulty the first and second year of high school. But, in the second year, having completed 20 years, he received the military service slip, and had to discontinue his studies. The friend Earl Francis Perez

recommended him to the Principal physician Cavazocca, his relative, so that the young Calabria would be assigned to the health service. And so, Calabria was enrolled and assigned to the Fifth Health Company, at the military hospital of Verona.

Among the clergy of Verona there was a long and beneficial tradition in the service and assistance of the sick.

During the bloody battles between the French, Austrians and Piemonte, the city had turned into a huge hospital. The sick and wounded filled hospitals, convents and institutes. To the total insufficiencies of the sanitary services of the civil authorities, they tried to substitute priests and nuns, but with an admirable dedication.

To guarantee assistance to the sick and wounded soldiers, a charitable institution was set up, through the initiative of Fr. Pietro Leonardi, called "*The Sacred Brotherhood of Priests and Lay Shippers*", which aimed to assist in turn, day and night, the wounded and the sick. Among the members we find Blessed Fr Carlo Steeb, a German from Tübingen, who converted from Lutheranism and became a Catholic priest, Nicola Galvani, St. Gaspar Bertoni, founder of the Stigmatines; St. Magdalene of Canossa, and many other priests and laity.

Even at the time of the young recruit Calabria, many clerics chose to carry out their military service in the military hospital.

Calabria was not a cleric, but a simple high school student. The good word of Earl Perez, was useful to enter the young Calabria in a situation where he could pour his love towards the poor suffering.

After the military service, Calabria returned to his high school studies. He resumed his apostolate in the oratory of San Lorenzo. There, he found again the young Friedmann, more and more firm in the idea of becoming a Catholic. The insistence of Calabria and the boy prevailed over the resistance of the parents, who, in the end, accepted that the child receive baptism.

After a year of preparation, on May 27, 1897, the boy was baptized and confirmed. The lawyer Francis Perez was the godfather of this boy, who wanted to dress him again, from head to toe. The boy, also wanted to take the Christian name of Francis, as a sign of gratitude and affection for his godfather. Two months later, the boy entered the college of the Stigmatine Fathers of Trento. He became an exemplary priest and religious. For his piety and wisdom, he was elected vice rector of the Seminary of Belluno.

FRANCIS PEREZ IS A SAINT OF THE ALTAR.

Father Friedman never forgot his godfather. At the death of Francis Perez, Fr. Friedmann wanted to give this testimony: "*For me, Brother Francis Perez is a Saint for the Altar: I never doubted it; I do not doubt it now, indeed I am quite certain of it. My first impressions of Francis' holiness go back to the first years of the Lord's mercy*

towards me ... Ever since I had him, fortunately, my Godfather in Baptism and Confirmation, I was struck by his profound and so spontaneous humility, his complete detachment from all things, his marked indifference, and the candour of a soul I would say a child, who shone from all the ways, from all his words. Even the Stigmatine Fathers spoke to me of Perez as a saint ... When I went to visit him in the House of Good Children, his appearance, his behaviour, his words, and everything in him revealed the saint: I felt the satisfaction, the joy of having spoken with a saint ... For my part, I am so certain that he already enjoys the eternal joys of the beatific vision. I turn to him every morning and evening to entrust him with the protection of my poor soul, to entrust fully to him, who loved me so much during his life. I, perhaps, will not have the good fortune to see him raised to the altars, but the day of his exaltation will certainly come ".

FATHER NATALE DI GESÙ: SPIRITUAL GUIDE OF THE TWO.

Another meeting, which more closely sealed the friendship between Earl Perez and the young Calabria, took place at the convent of the Carmelite Father Natale di Gesù, confessor of both.

This friar was an excellent director of consciences and had a reputation for holiness. All the members of the Perez family had chosen him as their confessor, highly appreciating his solid spiritual gifts.

Probably it was Earl Francis, who put Father Natale into contact with the young Calabria. And this encounter, for the person of Fr.

Calabria and for the birth and development of the "*Casa Buoni fanciulli*", will become a permanent and fundamental relationship.

Earl Francis, as a practical man, must have made Fr. Natale, aware of the precarious economic conditions of Calabria family and nothing prevents us from thinking that he has served as an intermediary for his secret charities to the same family.

In 1893, the Calabria family was evicted from Vicolo Disciplina for the delay of rent. At first, he moved for three years (from 1893 to 1896) to the nearby Riva St. Lorenzo, in the house of the maternal grandfather, and for another four years in Piazzetta Scalette Rubiani.

In 1900, the cleric John and his mother were housed in a room of the Pompeii-Perez Palace, in the coach driver's house, then unused. The building was owned by Earl Giovanni Perez, the elder brother of Francis. But Francis' good manners made it easy.

And here, then, the two friends lived under the same roof, with different conditions, but equal in virtues and aspirations.

Naturally, the Earl lived on the noble floor and the Calabria family on the ground floor. Often, they crossed paths at home, cementing friendship and strengthening the will to do good.

The meetings between these two friends intensified during the summer holidays, when the cleric John Calabria was hosted in the villa Zevio by the family of Fr. Luigi Brentaroli, chaplain of the Chiarenzi civil hospital. Fr. Luigi gave special repetitions to the cleric

Calabria in those more difficult subjects that forced him to make improvement examinations in September.

In the afternoon, a few times, he was invited by Francis Perez to take a few walks in a carriage or to participate in a game of bowls (*bocce*). At these games the parish priest Fr. Siena, Fr. Lucillo Poli and some other relatives of Earl Francis intervened. Indeed, among the relatives of Francis Perez, Calabria knew the Marquises Da Lisca, who spent the summer in Zevio, and who became benefactors of the Casa Buoni Fanciulli. In a particular way, Fr. Calabria remembered the Marchesa Noemi who, in her maternal goodness said to her husband: *"Poor thing! Let's keep this poor cleric here, this poor altar boy! "*

The Marquise Noemi in Da Lisca died on October 18, 1923. Fr. Calabria participated in the condolences to her husband, recalling the good that the Marquise had done to him*: "From the depths of my heart and with sincere affection I allow myself to send Your Honour my sincere condolences, in the grave loss of his noble wife, Lady Marquise Noemi.*

I am united to you in grief and I share the profound mourning of all the Noble family, and for my part I assure you that I will pray and ask our Good Children to pray for the blessed soul of dear Estinta, if she still needed it, and for mourning elders; so that the Lord, who wanted to subject them to such a painful trial, grant them the Christian acceptance to the divine will ".

The friendship and esteem between Francis Perez and John Calabria, grew stronger and stronger every day.

The two chosen souls watered themselves at the same source: God.

The anxieties and enthusiasm for the Kingdom of God rocked from one heart to another, feeding on prayer and very daring dreams. However, no dreams remained just as dreams.

CHAPTER NINE

RAGBOY AN INSPIRATION

THE GYPSY BOY AT THE CLERIC CALABRIA.

One late evening in November 1897, the cleric Calabria was coming home, after having assisted a young man from the oratory, who was seriously ill. At that time, he lived in Piazzetta Scalette Rubiani.

It was a cold and damp evening. The street was poorly lit by the flames of the gas lamps. As he searched for his house keys, he stumbled over a wet bundle. He bent down and discovered a sleeping boy, curled up under a pile of rags. He shook him slightly. A boy moved, rubbed his eyes and stammered a few words, whimpering: "*They beat me, so many beatings ... and then I ran away*". The cleric Calabria recognized the child; he had seen him many a time along Via

Cavour with a mouse in a cage. The trained animal took a piece of paper, where some numbers were printed to play in the lottery, and offered them to those who made an offer.

"I don't want to go back to them anymore. You are good, you always give me alms and you love me. I want to be with you ", and he kept on cuddling and sniffling. "*Get up and enter the house*," Calabria cut him short.

In the dim light, he saw a poor frightened brat, thin, and with two eyes like that of a scared deer. "*Meanwhile, sit down and eat*," said the cleric Calabria, setting him on a chair and placing the plate of his own modest dinner in front of him. Then he pulled up three chairs, laid his mattress on it and set up a warm nest for that frightened creature. He adapted to sleep on the bare wooden panels. *"Tomorrow we will think about finding your family. Now sleep peacefully"*.

Seeing him curled up under the covers he looked like a pile of inert bones: *"Poor boy! You would need so much to be hugged and warmed by a mother's breast. And instead, the misery and wickedness of men have altered you into a product of profit".*

The next morning, he saw him awake, more serene, but with a scab of dirt on his skin. The patience of old Masina, who lived in Calabria house scraped away the grunge off him. And finally, the pale face of a child of about six appeared.

Cleric Calabria ran to Fr. Scapini, his patron and protector, to ask for advice on what to do. He certainly couldn't throw him back on the

road, but he also had to be cautious. "*In the meantime, keep him at home and we'll find out about his family*," advised Fr. Scapini. The child had no document with him and could not explain himself well in Italian. He probably belonged to some caravan of gypsies who, fearing a complaint for mistreatment, had gotten away at night.

Even Fr. Natale, his confessor and spiritual director, informed the fact and advised Calabria to wait for a "*sign from the Lord*" before deciding the fate of the child.

That same day, Francis Perez provided everything needed to dress the little gypsy. And three days later, during a party held in the house of the Marquise Da Lisca, a raffle was organized. The proceeds were destined "*for the child at the cleric Calabria*". It was 60 lire. A nice amount for those times.

And also, in this gesture, you can bet that there was the hand of Francis Perez.

The search on the possible family did not give results. Then, they thought of placing the child at the Artigianelli Institute in Brescia, which had an agricultural colony in Bussolengo, Verona. Calabria continued to take an interest in the child and loved him like a son. He tried to help him materially and spiritually.

When the boy was sufficiently old, Calabria decided to have him baptized under condition but with the authorization of the Bishop, and gave him a name: Augusto Meneghini. Ten years later, Fr. John presented the young boy to the registry office to be regularly registered in the municipal documents. The Fabbro brothers acted as

witnesses. After a brief consultation, the minutes for the recognition of civil citizenship were drawn up, he was assigned the presumed age of 18 years and a conventional date of birth, on March 17, 1890.

In the Municipality of Verona, the Registry Office, we find the following is documented: "Recognition of civil citizenship of Meneghini Augusto: On May 2, 1908, [...] appeared before me, Meneghini Augusto an unknown, aged 18, bookbinder, born in an unknown place and here domiciled ... he asks to transcribe them in this register ... he asked for notary - he had four witnesses who swore: *"It is true and well known and it is to our personal knowledge that in November 1897 the Reverend Oreste John Calabria of late Luigi, returning one evening at 11.00 pm from the visit of a sick man, he met a child on the public street, of the approximate age of six, who asked him for alms. On the door of his house the child himself who slept soundly, woke him up and asked him why he was there to sleep. He replied: 'I have no one, I don't know where to go. My parents beat me and I said: I will go to the priest. These words touched the Reverend Fr. Calabria who, having picked up the child, became his protector from then on, since this child, who later said he was called Augusto Meneghini, had no known relative. All possible practices were carried out, including through the police, to find out about the origin of the same, but it turned out only that the Augustus Meneghini was bought in Sestri Levante by some gypsies, who then abandoned him in Verona. Later on, the Meneghini Augusto was lodged by the Rev. Fr. Calabria, placed in several places: in Bussolengo, in the Institute of the Sons of Mary; in Avio (Trento) with a family; in the Don Bosco Institute and the Carmelite Friars in Verona. Now he is at the aforesaid Fr. Calabria ". Read, confirmed and signed ...".*

This providential encounter appeared to the cleric Calabria as a particular call from God. He will write in his memo: "*This Opera of the Lord (the Buoni Fanciulli House) I felt still confused when I was a cleric and the Lord, then, gave me a clear sign, when one winter evening, made me meet at the door of my house, a poor child, about five years old, abandoned by all and whom I picked up and put in my room, sharing the bed with him..* " .

CHAPTER TEN

COMMITED TO THE SUFFERING

THE PIOUS UNION TO THE RELIEF OF THE SICK

The military life of the young John Calabria was a tough but valuable school. What he had learned and done in the military hospital had fascinated him. He used to say with pleasure to the religious: "*They were the most beautiful and spiritually fruitful years of my life*". After becoming a cleric, he thought that what he had done in the service of the sick hospitalized in the military hospital, he could do even with the sick people of the civil hospital. He spoke at length with two of his cleric friends, Pio Tinazzi and Pio Visentini. Thus, the charitable association, "*The Pious Union to the relief of the sick*" was born.

Calabria drew up a brief and simple regulation, divided into eight points, and presented it to his own Bishop, Cardinal Luigi di Canossa: "*The aim is to make the weekly visit to the poor and abandoned sick of the Hospital and shelter homes ... The visit would take place on Thursday, in the hours of free access ... The promoters will try to console the sick, and to animate them with the Christian acceptance and the desire for Heaven. They will bring material aid according to their possibilities".* The Cardinal approved and blessed the initiative. Certainly, the cleric Calabria also spoke of it to the Earl Perez who became a benefactor together with his relative Marquis Da Lisca. But, Francis Perez, stimulated by the example of the young cleric, did not want to be contented with being a simple benefactor, but asked to be admitted among the "promoters". According to the Regulations, they had to *"propagate the activity by looking for benefactors, collect the offerings and go every Thursday to visit the sick of the hospitals and shelter homes and sometimes even visit the sick at homes".*

Francis accepted the regulation and did all this scrupulously, even becoming a mendicant. Visiting the sick in their homes, the Earl, had the opportunity to see the misery closely, and learned to share, understand, and comfort. He fell in love with the suffering and painful Christ in the sick people. He asked to be part of the group that had committed itself to poor patients who were bedridden in the family or hospitalized for night care. And he did not stop only at assistance, but with an attentive look he tried to evaluate what were the materials and reliefs that the poor patients needed.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

COMMON VENTURE TO CARE

THE TWO APOSTLES OF CHARITY.

On August 11, 1901, the young Calabria was consecrated as priest, through the laying on of the hands of Cardinal Bartolomeo Bacilieri, bishop of Verona.

The first pastoral commitment, entrusted to him, was in the parish of Santo Stefano, in the so-called Veronetta.

The city of Verona, after having been disputed and mistreated for so long by the Austrian and French armies, had been divided into two parts, with the Treaty of Luneville, on February 09, 1801. The river Adige, which runs through the whole city from north to south with its indolent inlets, had become its natural boundary. The French were given the historic centre (about 36,000 inhabitants), and the Austrians the left bank, with all the castles (just under 20,000 inhabitants: hence used the name of Veronetta).

This foreign military servitude, mortified the city and threw it into a situation of humiliation and degradation. The one who suffered most was the youth, who were left to themselves, without schools and employment. In the chronicles of the newspapers of the time

there are references to gangs of young beggars, who sometimes even became dangerous thieves.

In this context of misery rose intrepid and courageous priests, who took to heart the fate of these boys, preparing the bases for a rescue of the city: Fr. Pietro Leonardi, St. Gaspare Bertoni, Fr. Giuseppe Giacomelli, Fr. Nicolo Mazza and many others prior to the young Fr. John Calabria.

And right in the parish of Santo Stefano, in the heart of Veronetta, considered then as the slum of the city, the new priest, Fr. John Calabria, began his pastoral ministry.

In his memorial Fr. Calabria writes: "*I was sent to Santo Stefano, a parish of poverty and scarcity ...".*

And when he who had for so long swallowed the bitter bread of other people's charity and suffered all the humiliations of poverty, says so, there is to believe that the condition of that poor people was really miserable.

It must be kept in mind that Verona, a military city and fortress of the famous Austrian rectangular, did not have factories and the surrounding countryside was continuously squeezed and depleted by the continuous seizures of animals and food for the army.

In the slum of the city, where the parish of Santo Stefano was located, the only activity of some importance was the silkworm cocoon stock, where fifty women worked seasonally, which occupied

in turn; about fifty laundresses; and the seasonal cultivation of "muskmelon".

The pay was poor and the contracts were expensive. Even children and young girls were employed in cotton mills and in wool with inhuman hours (12-14 hours a day). Unfortunately, in order to survive, the families had to send even the youngest children to work, depriving them of the time to play and, above all, of the period of cultural and moral formation.

Fr. John, faced with these situations, felt he had to do something. He would have taken all the abandoned boys to his house, to look after them and to make them grow up healthy, educated and good, if his economic conditions had permitted. He continues in his note: "*From the first year of my priesthood, I began to collect in my house poor abandoned children and after some time, I tried to put them in some Institute ...".*

The problem of the poor, abandoned or exploited youth is heart breaking to any sensitive souls. But the phenomenon was so vast that it discouraged any single generous attempt. We had to pray and pray a lot because society would change and realize economic systems and socio-political forms more attentive to the needs of the weak. He, like so many other holy Founders of Institutes, did nothing to fight political structures. He did not want to side with anywhere, nor with red or white leagues, nor with the Socialists or the popular or the Fascists. More than fighting for social justice in the strict sense, he felt committed to concrete, immediate, and petty charity. To these boys, who roamed over the streets of Verona, he gave all his fatherly love, daily bread, a book and a trade. There were, and there will

always be, prophets and preachers of a world without inequalities, who branded these works of charity, as foolishness and palliative sleeping, because, according to them, they serve to shore up social systems founded on injustice.

But Fr. Calabria was born to be a priest and did it in a creditable way. He became interested in human being, giving him dignity and social conscience: this was his revolutionary action. His work and his intervention have been very little compared to the tide of exploited, belittled and abandoned children. A drop that was lost in the vast ocean of indifference and human selfishness; but he could not remain inert in the expectation of a more just world. He had to do something right away.

He asked his confessor for advice. He wanted to understand if that anxiety stirred and wedged him in his brain came from a humanitarian philanthropic sensibility or was a call from God.

Fr. Natale encouraged him to do as much as he could and then "*pray and wait for a sign from the Lord".*

Thus, began his tiny activity: when he found a child, who lived in misery and abandonment, he approached him gently and invited him to his house, where there was always an extra seat at the table and a clean bed always ready.

Then he looked for the Institute that could welcome him free or at a reduced price. He turned to the Hospice of the Exposed for the little ones, to the Institute of the Sons of Mary for children, to the Artigianelli Institute of Brescia or to the Don Bosco Institute, for the

adolescents. For some he undertook to pay the fee for the boarding school and, when the expense began to be too burdensome for his pockets, he solicited the generosity of his friends, in particular the generosity of his friend the Earl Francis, always ready to come meeting the desires of Fr. John, pouring out sums, clothes, food, medicines, with tact and delicacy, without making noise and in anonymity.

Having chosen the mission of the Good Samaritan, Fr. John was not satisfied with a few isolated cases. Too many rags of suffering humanity were present before his eyes.

YOUNG CHIMNEY SWEEPS

Whoever sets out on this road develops a more acute vision and acquires a particular sensitivity. He manages to discover submerged worlds that remain unknown to others.

And so, Fr. Calabria found, sadly, another odd isolated world: the little smokestack cleansers who came down from the mountains to do an awkward and poorly paid job. In the few moments of pause from work, united with packs like stray dogs, these children wandered around the city, filthy and soiled with dirt.

Fr. Calabria tried to approach them and invited them to spend their leisure time in the oratory, where they would be well received. They listened to him, their eyes reddened, sad, and humiliated. The

dirt, which they felt on them like leprosy, kept them separated from the people. Fr. Calabria sensed their humiliation and suffered from it. With his afflicted brains, he decided to provide a place during the night, where these poor could take refuge and clean up. The following morning, he went to his friend Francis Perez and spoke to him tenderly:

"We take accommodation for these kids, where they can get together and wash".

Earl Perez, who by now had become the material executor of the young priest's projects, set off in search of a home. He found a two-story building in Vicolo Cigno and hired it. The house could accommodate about thirty people and, above all, had toilets and showers. Other benefactors contributed to the furnishings and fixtures. Every year, during the carnival, Fr. Calabria and his friend Perez organized the chimney sweepers' party. All the families and the operators of the parish were involved in the preparation. After having eaten a good lunch, the chimney sweepers closed the day with a carriage ride through the streets of the city. A great noblemen's tour!

CHAPTER TWELVE

IN THE DIOCESAN COUNCIL

THE CONFERENCE OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY

To be closer to the Santo Stefano parish, Fr. John sought and found a house near Ponte Pietra. Francis often went to see his friend, a priest. With him, Francis learned the painful situations of poor families and started to help them to lighten their pain.

Francis enrolled in the Conference of Saint Vincent de Paul of this parish of the Holy Apostles. He worked so zealously that he was chosen as a member of the Diocesan Council, with the task of drafting the annual reports. To read his notes we discover dramatic stories: he talks about shoes, clothes, medicines, rent to pay, bread, dowries for marriage, unemployment, alcoholism, etc. Coming from an aristocratic world, these were all unknown to him. A world that shook him deeply.

And he opened his heart as well as his wallet: a new suit for a boy, an eviction avoided for a poor family, and anonymous offers to various charitable institutions. It must be said that the revenues of Earl Francis did not end with the bank or profit, investments. They passed quickly to the needy.

Love for the poor made him eloquent. We report the passage of a speech given to the members of St. Vincent.

THE POOR ARE OUR BEST MASTERS

"The poor are our teachers. In the midst of the most squalid poverty, sometimes expressed by illness and various moral sorrows, in those hovels and in those attics, hidden sacrifices and so many proofs of virtue are often discovered that, even if they remain hidden, are like the joys that shine among the hard rocks of the mountain.

The example of so many sacrifices and so much resignation in that God who was crucified, and whose image is just at ease where the doer reigns, should be a school for everyone".

A school! He proposed this school to the members who were also parents:

"You have children. What a useful graze, what a moving show they show to them, to display them our Lord, not only in the images painted by the most famous masters, or on splendidly lighted altars, but to show them Jesus and his wounds in the person of the poor. The children, must see others suffer to learn how to suffer, to be prepared when the pain will sooner or later touch them.

We and our children need to know what means hunger, thirst, and bare attic. They must experience the pain and solitude of the sick, and hunger of the crying children. They must love them! Either this sight will awaken some throb in their heart or this generation is lost ".

These words quoted by us, are words of Francis pronounced during the meeting with a passionate heart, a few months before he decided to abandon the comforts of his House, to go and live forever at the "Casa Buoni Fanciulli" of S. Zeno in Monte, there, where poverty and the need was the usual atmosphere.

Stopping to read the annual reports, from 1899 to 1908, which Francis wrote in the name of the members of San Vincenzo, we see a sensitive soul that knew how to understand the world of poverty.

Although he came from a totally different environment, he did not find psychological obstacles in entering the soul of the poor.

He did not see it as "another world", to which he could pay attention and a passing aid, or pour out a charity that relieved his conscience as a wealthy person.

He called assisted families "our families", with a feeling of belonging or, at least, of sharing.

Another note that emerges from the first lines of these Reports is the awareness that the exercise of these "visits", which were made twice a week, was a precious school for those who made them, much more useful to them than to those who benefited materially.

But the greatest joy the members of the charitable association felt, was when they could provide some of their assisted with a job, so that they could earn for their families. Perez called these families "*re-established*", that is, no longer assisted by St. Vincent.

We can imagine the joy that Perez felt when he managed to get some poor people to work; returning home, he was bursting with joy and he thanked God with the sisters Bice and Lavinia. But sometimes he came back sad and disconsolate for the occasional failures: new diseases, new difficulties and little correspondence.

All the other commitments for the management of the family's assets and for the work of the municipal administration, could not distract him from the vision of so many families brutalized by poverty, of so many fetid basements or so many mice, where he had seen old people and children rot.

"CHARITY: BEAUTIFUL WORK WE CAN DO TO THE NEEDY"

With enthusiasm and conviction, he spoke these words in the annual reports of the Diocesan Council.

"It is a great joy to rehabilitate them morally and economically, to enable them to do it for themselves ... That is the most beautiful charity we can do to them. And sometimes it seems to have found a work, in a non-suitable place, where the master is not happy, that boy does not want to do well and returns as before. But if we are made to provide them with a good placement, what a consolation for us too! "

In these detailed reports, made in the presence of the bishop of Verona, authentic stories emerge that resemble certain pages of

crude realism of Victor Hugo's "The Wretched" "*Le misérable",* almost a bleak fresco of the miseries seen live.

This activity, which led him to go up and down many dark staircases, the weekly meeting with emaciated faces and sad eyes, was a novitiate for Francis who prepared him for the final choice of consecration to the Lord.

He already knew the poor that his friend Fr. Calabria had brought home, both in the rectory of San Benedetto from February 11, 1907 and in the little house of Vicolo Case Rotte, from November 06, 1907. But he had seen them removed from their environment of abjection and returned to a dignity, poor but decent.

The contrast between the misery he saw and his wealthy life tore his heart apart. His possessions burned his soul like burning embers. For this reason, he partially got rid of them, giving them to his sister Bice in exchange for cash advance to be given to Fr. Calabria for the purchase of San Zeno in Monte.

The third report of St. Vincent, written in 1908, which Francis made when he was already thinking about the definitive leap and was preparing to enter, poor and naked, between the walls where poverty and deprivation were sovereign.

The members of Saint Vincent and the religious authorities were struck by the ardour with which Francis concluded his plea. They could not imagine that it was a prelude to an official leave from the activity of St. Vincent and from social life.

"*Truly, the members of the Conferences have so much to learn, in contemplating how many miseries surround us and from which God wanted to spare us, to see how much peace and resignation are borne by those who have no other light than that of the Gospel, another doctrine that of Christ ...*

We trust in Providence so that He may send us numerous members, and to give those already present, the spirit that makes them appear true disciples of the school of Christ".

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FRANCIS SERVING IN POORHOUSE

FRANCIS PEREZ WITH THE POORHOUSE OF THE STIGMATINE

Every charitable activity aimed at supporting, helping and stimulating to alleviate suffering to free others from material and moral poverty, always we found the young Francis Perez present.

Near the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Orphanages founded by St. Gaspare Bertoni, in Piazza Cittadella, had become the most important youth centre of the city and of the diocese of Verona.

The enthusiasm and dynamism of the director Fr. Fantozzi had attracted the best Veronese youth energies to the Orphanage.

The Stigmatine fathers offered religious assistance, scientific and professional education, and an assorted complex of recreational and sports activities.

The Stigmatine destitute home was a volcano of initiatives. Fr. Calabria himself had attended the four elementary classes at this institute. Even there, Francis went to work, happy to donate time and money for those children of the people.

Francis joined the Marian Congregation of the Church of the Stigmata since 1900, and was later elected Prefect of the Oratory.

Later he was also an assistant and warden in the oratory, an office that involved being present during the game and during prayer. He also cared for and treated the small bruises that the boys got in the game and accompanied the unruliest back home, so that they wouldn't get in trouble along the way. Francis' attachment to the Fathers of the "Stigmata" lasted throughout his life.

When the dynamic director of the oratory, Fr. Fantozzi, though not having a penny, launched the idea of transforming the church of Santa Teresa into the Sanctuary of the Madonna of Lourdes, Francis immediately came forward, who with his sisters poured the first 15,000 lire out of the 100,000 lire that went and that soon emerged from several parts. The biographer Fr. Cirillo Boscagin, states that the idea of enlarging the church and turning it into a shrine in honour of

the Madonna of Lourdes came to Francis Perez, who felt committed to contributing with that huge sum.

Within two years the new Sanctuary was ready. In 1909, it was consecrated by the bishop of Lourdes, Msgr. Saverio Schoepfer, together with Cardinal Bacilieri and along with the Stigmatine Bishop Msgr. Morando.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HOMEBASED RIGHTEOUSNESS

DILIGENT ADMINISTRATOR OF FAMILY ASSETS

The Perez family owned 1,087 hectares of cultivated land in the Municipality of Zevio. And they paid very high taxes. In the period in which his father Antonio Perez was mayor of Zevio, the Perez family had built a bridge over the Adige River and various other public works, at his own expense.

In 1886, his eldest brother Giovanni, with the death of Antonio Pompei, the last descendant of his family, inherited not only his name of honour, but also his possessions: several fields, a villa in Illasi, and the monumental palace Muselli in Corso Cavour in Verona, which

since then began to be called Palazzo Pompei-Perez, today known as Palazzo delle Assicurazioni.

Francis, at the wish of his father, was commissioned to also administer all this patrimony.

On January 4, 1890, Francis' father Antonio Nicolò Perez died. His death occurred suddenly, without the Earl Antonio having had time to draw up a will. Francis, by unanimous decision of the brothers Giovanni, Elena, Bice, Maria and Lavinia, was chosen as executor of the estate for the division of property. When the division was completed, everyone was satisfied with the inherited part.

With the death of his father, Francis practically became head of the family and, despite feeling a natural disregard for money, he was forced to take on the role of director of all assets. He did this work with scrupulous accuracy, justice and competence. Because of his moral accuracy, later, in 1903, he was chosen as Administrator of the religious Congregation of the "Sisters of the Holy Family," in Verona.

Finally, on the death of his mother the Lady Marchesa Anna Da Lisca, he had to take on the burden of managing the administration of all her assets too.

SOCIAL STRUGGLES OF THE EMPLOYEES IN THE EARLY 1900.

The decade 1900-1910 was a particularly hot and tormented period in Italy. The ideas of socialism were expanding everywhere. In

particular they spread like wildfire from the Polesine, to the "Lower Verona", where the agricultural labourers were oppressed by harassment and incredible injustice. It was not difficult for the socialists to take hold of these poor wretches.

The peasants, gathered in red leagues, were stirred up to claim their rights with hatred and violence. The utopian ideas of Saint-Simon and Fourier, who hypothesized a new order based on an economic and social conception of human rights. It inculcated through social education and with class conflicts and ridiculed and outclassed by the revolutionary concept. The theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel, whose ultimate goal was the transformation of private property into social property, and the main struggle was the class struggle to achieve this goal.

Even in the Venetian countryside and, in particular in Zevio, violence manifested itself in strikes and processions that often degenerated into scuffles and fights. They are against the bosses, among whom was also Earl Perez, owner of 150 hectares of good land leased and sharecropping. After the division of property, which took place at the death of his father, the 1,087 hectares of land belonging to the Perez family, and of which 150 hectares were of Earl Francis Perez.

And so, Francis, as a landowner and as a Christian, found himself fighting on two fronts, that of unfair capitalism and that of red socialism, which claimed justice for the exploited, but seasoned it with an angry struggle against the Church.

Together with the sacrosanct wage claims, these popular agitations fed on unbelief and vindictive hatred.

In these political and social struggles, Francis did not retreat, convinced that the Christian layman must also "get his hands dirty" in earthly things without forgetting his eternal destiny. He entered the political list, intervening in the rallies, taking the floor, not so much to defend his privileges, but to oppose the little fans of these hate preachers.

His ideas were well rooted in the social doctrine of the Church, which has its roots in evangelical justice, enlivened by charity.

In his daily conversation with Fr. Calabria, Francis tried to confront him to see if his ideas matched the evangelical demands.

On February 22, 1906, in the very poor parish of Santo Stefano, where he for the past five years cared the boys, Fr. John Calabria gave an exemplary speech, a catechetical instruction on the burning local problems.

The curator's words were vibrant. Without naming political factions, he knew how to direct his critics to those responsible:

"... In our day the name brotherhood is on everyone's lips; but what equality and brotherhood one can have without Jesus Christ?... ...

Blue-collar brotherhood, which deprives the poor of the good faith, will not solve the social question. It will not be the aristocratic

philanthropy, equally disbelieving, and shifty in ways, which take care not to get your hands dirty and not to get dirty your clothes, to console the poor. He never forgets self, and offers the gift, but he knows how to give it, and the poor man, eloquently, recognises what he receives. Philanthropy is a human virtue, but a gesture of gratitude is enough not to get it, just a gesture, a word to turn your face around and no longer help those in need, on the contrary, it is often converted to hatred ".

And with these words Fr. Calabria closed his instruction. The patriciate, which did not include the poor, like the socialists who exploited it, was served. Earl Francis, who already lived by the Gospel, did not need these words. However, his heart, comforted by these suggestions of Fr. Calabria, fell more and more in love with that Christian ideal which reveals the love of God the Father to the poor and the rich.

The elders of Zevio, who testified before the commission that set up the process of beatification of Francis, remembered the last memorable contradictory between a socialist representative and Perez, on the square of Zevio. The Honourable Ran in such a way that it was not difficult for Francis to confront the truth point by point. The result was a great applause for Francis and hissings on the back of the Honourable.

A fellow countryman of Francis told a fact that preceded the struggles between "don Camillo and Beppone" by Guarreschi. On May 3, 1903, Zevio received the bishop's pastoral visit of Cardinale Bacilieri. A small group of troublemakers took advantage of the occasion to stage an uproar against the parish priest and the Sisters.

A dancing party was organized in the village, as a sign of freedom from all religious prejudice. Naturally the parish priest Don Augusto Siena intervened thundering against this intentionally offensive demonstration. In return, the mayor and other ringleaders put up a poster, where the parish priest and the dancing Sisters were depicted, colouring the caricature with offensive words.

The town was divided into two factions: that of the conformists, who disassociated themselves and did not participate in the event, and the few troublemakers, who gathered under the tower of the Due Mori. To proclaim themselves followers of progress and civilization. The troublemakers anticipated the clock hand foreword for ten-minutes on the tower. Thus, in the village, there were two schedules, based on the ideological division.

Francis Perez, faced with these radical and ridiculously childish forms, decided to intervene, aware of his responsibility as a citizen and representative of the Municipality. One day he hoisted the Tricolor on the door of his house and gave a fervent speech. Many came to hear it. His sincerity, his patriotism, his honesty and his Christian consistency, had the upper hand over the bravado of those few buffoons. The applause marked the end of an unworthy smear campaign and those gentlemen who thought they were mocking religion with impunity disappeared from Zevio's political scene, ashamed of the awful image they had made."

"*But to Francis,* commented Fr. Carlo Sempreboni, *those who were not cheered did not like them. He preferred the meeting with the peasants to the public and brawls, not only with his employees, but with everyone. He preferred reasoning to marches and street*

demonstrations. And he won. There were those who tried to intimidate him. In that red-hot climate, it was not difficult to take the sly, I don't say a shot, but a slamming, yes. To those who warned him of the danger, he replied that nothing had to reproach himself about his relations with his tenant farmers. Then, he added, I kept in my pocket a very valid weapon of defence: the rosary. "

Speaking of the rosary, - Francis' favourite weapon, - we like to bring back a testimony of a sprightly 89-year-old woman, released at the testimony for the Beatification of Brother Perez in 1938: "*I met Francis Perez at an early age, because he often came to our house. The Pompeii palace is here 200 meters away. The Earl was a very quiet man, quiet, distinguished, and respectful. He never broke up. He was reserved, of few words, but appropriate and just. That elegance of Francis gave us veneration and respect. He came to us, because my father, Todeschini Pietro, was part of the municipal administration. [...] I remember one evening some men had gathered to go to Bonomi Da Monte's house. They each had a stick. My father, seeing that Earl Perez did not have it, asked him: "And you, Earl Francis? Don't you have anything in your hand? "Earl Perez, calm and serene, with a royal manner, took out the rosary from his pocket and said so calmly: "This is my defence!" There was also the priest, Fr. Lucillo Poli, who had joined them*."

All the employees loved Earl Francis because he was not arrogant; yet he was still a master for his tenant farmers. Two brave priests, Msgr. Giuseppe Manzini and Msgr. Davide de Massari, and the fiery union leader Massimo Besozzi, had founded rural houses and labour cooperatives in the "lower Legnago area".

These pioneers of the social doctrine of the Church beat the Venetian countryside, forming rallies to propagate the social doctrine of the Church to unruly masters who tormented their employees. Often the rallies ended in scuffles or defamation trials, brought by the powerful landlords.

Perez felt himself as accused. He too was a "landlord" who lived on income. Sharecroppers and tenants worked his farmlands from which he drew his wealth and his substantial living. Was he also a working-class oppressor?

What would have served the making of the exciting doctrine of the Church, propagating so many lucid social solutions, relieving the poor with some generous donations, if the contracts agreed with the workers of his lands had not agreed to so many fine words? Manzini's fiery invectives were also addressed to him, which thundered against "the false Christians"?

He wanted to dispel any doubts and sought the person who could honestly and impartially evaluate the working relationships with his employees. Then, he took all the contracts drawn up between his family and employees, and handed them over to Msgr. Manzini, asking him to report of any injustice. Msgr. Manzini, an open minded, refined in spirit and a lover of truth and justice, took it seriously. He was an expert on the subject. After a few days, he returned the contracts to Francis with this judgment: *"The contracts examined wisely reflect the social duties of the Christian and can serve as a model not only of perfect justice, but of a broad influx of charity*".

But this was not enough for Francis' delicate soul. He also wanted to hear the opinion of those concerned, his employees. He went to visit them on foot and, discussing familiarly with them, he tried to know their needs. They, in front of him, did not feel in awe, because they sensed the sincerity of intentions of their exceptional master. Their salaries were higher than those of the other masters; working for the Perez was a real pleasure and privilege. And they felt him close and sensitive to their problems.

"He gave the workers the necessary rest, both in the morning and in the afternoon - remembers a witness - and had even offered a glass of wine brought during work breaks. Meeting his peasants, men and women, who returned from work, he took off his hat and greeted them nobly, without haughtiness. But above all, he helped the poor and the unemployed without making them bear the social difference.

Once a week, he invited the poor and unemployed to his palace for an abundant meal, often served by him personally, and giving each partaker some wheat and corn."

Everyone felt honoured and proud of having such a master. The children loved him too. When he went to school, as an inspector (a position he held for several years), all the students were happy because they knew that the "Earl" never arrived with empty hands.

We also find written records that reveal his specific attention to the difficulties of his peasants. Someone remembered Perez's attentions and understandings, when *"the vintages had not been good or because the products had suffered sharp reductions at the time of the harvest".*

But the testimony of St. John Calabria is also important, who, speaking to his novices, told: *"When he was still in the world, (Francis Perez), every year at Christmas, prepared the table for twelve poor, dressed them and gave them in abundance."*

And when the pellagra raged in the countryside, Francis himself went in a carriage to give salt to his peasants. He would have done it for the others too, but this paternalistic attitude was not appreciated by the other landlords, who accused him of naivety and called him "useful idiot" for the propaganda of socialist ideas. But Francis knew he was on the side of truth and continued straight on his way.

A farmer from Zevio, with simple illiteracy, wanted to give a testimony about the public life of Francis: "*It is the kind task of a humble employee to be able to describe in his minute intelligence, the honest, charitable and religious work accomplished [...] both for friends of high grade, and for all his settlers and poor strangers, his employee. Never in his daily walk did he refuse an advice, alms, a consolation, a word of hope [...] Perfect religious, an in-depth specialist of the needs of his citizens, whether they were religious or not, his word convinced good for the tenants. He granted payment extension when the tenant could not pay; and for this, Earl Francis has always enjoyed esteem, respect, admiration of his villagers. Noble at heart, he expected direct employees to Mass and, proudly, he smiled at his opponents who, behind his good advice, saw them increasingly approaching the holy religion.*

To me and to my family he left a perennial memory that still today, although he is separated by death, we remember him and we will

never forget him in our daily prayers. Too many good works he has sown, which cannot be described. I would like to say a lot, but I don't have the ability to explain myself. Devoutly, the faithful employee who thinks and prays.

Mariotto Vittorio, May 15, 1938. "

This is a written testimony of the farmer Mariotto, Fr. Calabria kept it with veneration in the drawer of his desk.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

THE INSPIRING CITY COUNCILLOR OF ZEVIO.

Even before the unity of Italy, The Perez Family, being a great land Lord and tax payer, had the right to be part of the administration of Zevio, since many years. After 1866, with the annexation of Veneto region to Italy, they retained the right to elect and be elected to the City Council.

From January 19, 1888 to February 27, 1890, Francis worked as Deputy Magistrate of Verona. After two years, he gave resignation,

due to the impossibility of fulfilling the new administrative tasks of his family's assets.

In 1892, Francis was elected Councillor of the Municipality of Zevio. He continued to hold this office for about twenty years.

The biographer Boscagin speaks of this period as Councillor:

"In apparent contrast with his rather reserved and shy nature of external manifestations, he absolved his public-social commitment with severity and justice, rebelling against every form of clientelism and seeking personal favours. Those who had known him in secular life, seeing him as a religious in San Zeno in Monte, occupied in humble services for poor children, struggled to recognize him as the energetic and impartial Municipal Councillor, and Councillor of the Civic Administration of Zevio. They struggled to recognize in that humble friar the noble President of the Congregation of Charity, the Vice Magistrate of Verona, the esteemed member of numerous civic commissions ".

All these multiform activities, were carried out by Francis with the scruple of a responsible citizen and with the diligence of a Christian, in full respect of the ideas of others, but without failing with his religious principles, which he never watered down in compromises. His only complaint was that of partisanship, having chosen to always put himself on the side of the poor, the unemployed, the defenceless and becoming their spokesman and defender.

But even in defending the poor, he did not sin of populist demagogy. He did not spoil his fellow citizens with undeserved favours, but he also tried to educate them about their civic duty.

In the public sessions he was always present, at least until he became religious. And when it was impossible for him to be present, being a religious in San Zeno in Monte, he resigned from this office because *“this, so far, has been more in name than fact, and it was time for me to come to this conclusion from which I am forced to do not deflect, even if the gentle insistence of the Honourable Member is put in place ”*.

We like to report the judgment of the great writer Riccardo Bacchelli.

"I have a bond with Verona, because my wife (Ada) is the daughter of a Perez, sister of that Francis Perez who became a friar, but more than a friar, …. was among the first followers of Fr. Calabria. [...] When he found a poor man, he took off his coat and gave it to him. Friends gave him a new one, which had the same purpose. [...] There are speeches by Perez, in the minutes of the Zevio Municipal Council archives, which are very sensible and also very noble from the point of view of charity. He had no shadow of the politician. I received the impression, even more resolute than it was in the family itself, of a greater man. “Spiritus fiat ubi vult." The Spirit blows where wants.

Bacchelli was a poet and playwright narrator. He wrote a great deal. His novel *"The mill on the Po"* is famous: a trilogy that includes the novels "*Dio ti salvi",* (May God Save You), *"La miseria viene in barca*" (The Misery Comes by Boat), and *"Mondo Vecchio sempre nuovo”,* (The Old World Constantly New). The writer became acquainted with the Perez, marrying Ada Perez, Francis's niece.

As already mentioned, in addition to the administration of the various assets of the family, Francis found himself engaged in many other public offices: Auditor of accounts, Inspector of the boys' schools and, in 1901, President of the "Congregation of Charity", (a civic body in charge of the administration of the goods of the poor), similar to today's Municipal Assistance Authority. Despite the changing political majority, now Catholic and now socialist, he was always re-elected President of the Congregation of Charity, in recognition of his honesty and prudence.

THE CONGREGATION OF CHARITY

After the plundering of the Church, under the Piemonte's "liberal" laws, the patrimony of the Church reserved for the poor and had been confiscated and administered by the State. This body managed the "Health" service to the poor of the list.

With the law of 1862, a "Congregation of Charity" was established in each municipality of the Kingdom, a moral institution supported by donations and legacies. It took care of the interests of the poor and assumed legal representation before the administrative and judicial authorities. He administered the assets that were assigned to him to grant income according to the legislation in force; and assisted and cared for the abandoned, the orphans, the juveniles, as well as the blind, poor, deaf and dumb.

The source and maintenance of the institute were the sums assigned by public bodies (municipality, and credit institutions) and

the other income of goods donated or left by private individuals. The "Congregations of Charity" were also in charge of administering the pre-existing pious associations, whose management was assigned to them by the respective municipal councils.

The management of the congregation of charity was entrusted to a council of administration, composed of one president and a certain number of members (depending on the unit of residing population) elected by the municipal council, and appointed a secretary and one treasurer for the respective management and correspondence and accounts. The regular instrument of the activity was the organic ruling. When these charitable congregations were suppressed their competence were transferred to the new municipal assistance bodies (ECA)

Annexed to the “congregations of charity” we find few “Institutes” with the function of helping various categories of poor. Among these we find the “institute of sixty virgins”, that had the duty to supply basic provisions to the destitute girls.

With great scrupulosity, Francis was managing these assets of the poor. He didn't let himself be flattered by anyone's recommendations. Sometimes they criticized him for meticulousness and tight-fistedness, but it was simply justice and fairness. With his possessions he was generous, but with those of the community he was rigorous and meticulous.

His strong points were: never get out of the margins allowed by the revenue of the organization and not be fooled by every petulant

whimper. He examined every request and discovered the truthfulness of what was reported.

In fulfilling his task as administrator of community property, he managed to overcome his natural shyness.

Precisely because he had "clean hands", he opposed the manoeuvres of the compulsory socialist majority with just harshness, always adhering to reality, with the utmost respect for the adversaries.

What he always cared about were the real poor. Always fair and uncompromising in denying assistance to the fake poor, vigilant and scrupulous in avoiding clientelism, he fell entirely into the often, difficult, examination of intricate cases. His records are meticulous, clear, and comprehensive. Every penny spent was justified. Without any fear, giving regular account to the Prefect of the administration of the Congregation of Charity, he made clear the interested and rash proposals of some councillors: justice above all!

And he did not hesitate to offer some scolding to those who wanted to cheat the cards, regardless of the fear of aversion or dislike. Moreover, he pays tribute to the transparency and honesty of his work by the fact that the Prefecture never presented him the slightest objection.

We can report a sensational case, as an example of administrative intransigence. A girl claimed to have the right to a dowry allowance. Francis, as President of the Institute, replied negatively. The girl appealed to the Prefecture of Verona, who ordered the check for the

applicant. Francis did not give in and he accurately listed the possessions and incomes of this girl's family. Francis' clarifications were so circumstantial as to convince the Prefecture to withdraw from the demand.

Even with the group of doctors and pharmacists a "long dispute" arose.

As regards, in particular, the relationship with pharmacists, Francis proposed to change the method that had been used so far. In fact, pharmacists used to send the municipality a global account, rather than specifying the type of medicines provided for free. This did not please Francis Perez, who demanded more respect and clarity in the administration of public money.

Nothing escaped his control, he wanted to be informed of everything: on every medicine supplied, their quality, quantity and price.

But he did not forget the right compensation for pharmacists, as they had to face the costs of packing, transport, corrosion, etc. *"I am pleased",* he wrote to the pharmacists in December 1902," that *you gentle-men of the circumstances in which the Congregation of Charity of Zevio finds itself invested, in order to complain to the Administration. If, under the aegis of the interest of this Institute, with a rough form, perhaps, but without failing to respect for you who are always esteemed as honest professional. The administration is obliged to hold on to the fair amount to which your salary is reduced. Their good disposition makes me hope that they will not be slow to accept our proposals as a limit to which the Congregation of Charity*

cannot reach. ... In any case, in order not to be too hard and rude towards many good and honest professionals, I dare to arbitrate for a further transaction, thus reducing the salary to 1650 lire, in the certainty that they have almost given me their word of acceptance".

And in May 1902 he specified to a pharmacist: *"I warn that those recipes which do not conform to these norms and which do not bear the countersign of the President of the Congregation of Charity or whoever for it, will be considered as null and void in the specifications. I also inform you that the medicine ... (he intended the generic medicine with less expense) is not included in the dispensary ".*

A STRICT MAN, BUT NOT A MANIPULATOR

As far as the medical doctors of the Municipality of Zevio were concerned, Francis complained that *"the expenditure on medicines for the poor is far superior to the budget. The undersigned does not ignore how to delicate the subject and how many obstacles stand in the way of achieving a light economy. But he does not doubt that if the Doctors want to suggest to the poor families some expedient, common also to the well-off, and to order simpler medicines or inexpensive, it will be possible to obtain the right advantage claimed by the weight now unbearable to the finances of the Institute. It portrays resources from the city's charity and this without jeopardizing the health of the poor*".

And this follows a series of detailed rules. In his good sense, however, Francis understood *"that every rule has its exception; therefore, if they believe exceptionally to leave the field of the*

provisions, they will have to accompany the recipe with a report in which the type of illness is specified, justifying the remedy ordered ".

Evidently it was not a question of rejecting medicines necessary for urgent cases, but of using, in ordinary cases, those alternative medicines, which are also effective and which would allow the use of the fund for everyone and not for the usual recommended and friends of doctors.

Today, after a century, even the Italian National Healthcare, faced with the waste and the greed of the pharmaceutical companies, has suggested to use the "generic drugs", equally effective as the brand ones. The money for the medicines of the poor was less, so they had to be managed with prudence and honesty.

If someone questioned his honesty or that of his collaborators, he knew how to react firmly, aware of the scrupulousness and sense of justice with which he worked: "*I allow myself to be observed,"* he wrote in 1905 to a doctor who had criticized for the said interferences. *"You doctor, do not know the minimum of the Congregation of Charity, and before turning to the representatives of an institution observations and complaints in the form of a lecture, you would have had to be informed of how things are. ... You have the right to safeguard your decorum as a municipal doctor. ... But no less the right to respect the decorum of the administrators that you en-masse bring up, on the regular behaviour of which I would ask you to specify the facts and names. Not being able to allow it with vague words and with an air of superiority you failed to respect them. I therefore await the indication of the names and of the facts of which you accuse us, and without fail I admire* ".

But as he was severe with those who made general accusations, he was equally ready to acknowledge his mistakes and those of his collaborators.

Clarified the misunderstandings that had been the source of somewhat justified criticism, he knew how to apologize: *"I am very sorry about how involuntarily, or maliciously, the councillors had acted ... On behalf of all the councillors I apologize, asking you to withdraw your requests for resignation. You know very well that sometimes the excessive zeal causes some rocks to collide, but I hope you would be willing to draw a veil on this unpleasant incident: In the meantime, I renew the credentials of my esteem "*.

In the practice of quick and fast charity, Francis did not forget social justice and the moral and civil progress of people.

With a renewing intuition, he spent most of his time not so much in dispensing aid, although necessary, but in finding job for the many unemployed, to enable them to help themselves.

He was inventive and tenacious in holding public works, to offer job opportunities to the unemployed who are unwillingly idle. In his own estates, especially in winter, he created jobs for cleaning up ditches: useful jobs, not always indispensable, but precious for the unemployed.

An overall judgment on the work of Francis, in this period of activity as a servant of the public goods, was drawn up by a Censor of his writings:

"*The Earl Perez gave all of himself, freely, timely and readily for the public good, accepting the tasks offered him, without ever looking for them, and with a Christian sense of solidarity.*

He managed the various offices and public money with intelligence and strict honesty. No one could ever make a note on the accuracy, correctness, punctuality, completeness and competence of the reports.

He sanctioned improvements for the civil community (such as, a project of a comfortable road proposed by him).

The management of the various offices and public funds was based on a certain rigor, which at first sight seemed excessive. But the rigor was not due to lack of sensitivity to the poor and even less to private resentments towards other responsible publics. He treated every colleague, subordinate or superior, with utmost respect, but with frankness and sincerity of high moral value, feeling supported by a right conscience.

His public duties always were in the area of charity and assistance departments. Sensitive and generous towards the poor due to their natural inclination and family tradition, every effort he put at the service of the neediest, without aspiring to high positions of power that in some way could fuel his ambition or favour him material interests.

The unanimous esteem he enjoyed did not fit his head. He never boasted his qualities or sought recognition. He had a spare and

essential temperament to work without hesitation to lift someone from misery.

There is no lack of facts that show his humility, in the knowledge that he could have inadvertently committed some mistake. Those few times as it happened to, he immediately sought reconciliation, giving his apologies first, without resorting to baseless justifications.

A trace of political discrimination never appears in his official writings. And yet there was no lack of ideological difficulties and contrasts. But even though he had to support the Christian political mark in public meetings, he never allowed politics to influence his conduct as an administrator.

Even with colleagues of different political colours, he always sought consensus and agreement, while defending justice and honesty without giving up. He had friendly relations with everyone, seeking mediations to smooth out inevitable conflicts that arose in the various fields of civil coexistence.

In conclusion: although the written material remains small, the figure of a Christian in one portion stands out as someone competent and humble, and sensitive to charity. Without flaunting the Gospel, he lived it inwardly even in public affairs, certainly building his superiors, collaborators and citizens, not with sermons, but with deeds".

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

TURNING POINT FOR FRANCIS

LAST DAYS OF MARQUISE ANNA DA LISCA

Lady, Marquise, Anna da Lisca, mother of Francis, died on August 02, 1896.

The last letter she wrote to Francis, dated October 5, 1892, and it is addressed to Illasi, a municipality on the outskirts of Verona, where her son was with his sisters, as administrator of the land. With a simple short stretch, she shows us a cheerful and lively Francis, who knew how to animate the company:

"*Dear Cecchino, I was very pleased with your few lines and the affection I find in them. I am glad in learning that you are together with the sisters at Illasi, where they will pass well with you, with your jokes you know how to keep the company alive. I often think of you all and I understand how calamities and critical circumstances know how to bind the spirits and how life together becomes a necessity".*

With the death of this holy mother, the life of Francis began to change radically. It was a real "conversion", a radical change in the

way of thinking and acting. His sister, Elena Perez, went so far as to say that Francis, from that moment, "began the real life".

“"When his mother died," she wrote," his life made a new turn and he began to devote himself to the poor and needy. [...] My brother Checco, has always been a good son, a good brother, and a good friend but his real life began after our mother died. Then he began to sanctify himself, giving himself to the poor, detaching himself from the world and entering the ‘Buoni Fanciulli’ Institute. From there he always wrote me brief letters at all times reminding me of my duties, especially as a mother and acquitting my weaknesses. He is a saint who has not made pomp of great things, but is a saint who in his life has vastly glorified the Lord ".

His mother's death was like cutting off the string which prevented him from flying high in the path of perfection. We realize that we are entering the hidden world of the soul of Francis Perez, following him on his slow and unrelenting journey towards the summit of holiness. It is difficult and presumptuous to breach into that supernatural world, where, above all, the grace of the Holy Spirit acts. We try, with humility and delicacy, confessing, at the outset, that we must stop only at the edge of this supernatural world.

Francis progressively fell in love with Christ in the poor and suffering and felt impelled to imitate him and live him in his own life. His increasingly intense attraction to radical poverty and to the poor became the object of his love, which blossomed in the choice of consecrated life.

If we do not set this foundation, some of Francis' actions might seem extravagant in an exalted mind. On the other hand, the same thing also happened to Jesus. It is recorded "*when his own heard of it, they went to take hold of him. For they said, 'he has gone mad'*."(Mk 3:21).

Francis outwardly, in family and social life, continued to maintain the decorum that suited his noble family, showing off impeccable clothes and participating in worldly parties. *"Everything foreshadowed an increasingly brilliant career,"* commented her niece Chiara Perez - *even though his piety and charity placed him in a certain sense out of himself*."

That internal change, fruit of prayer, charity and work of God's grace, began to be visible and palpable among the noble Veronese families. "*This change, at first was considered* - continues the niece Chiara - *to be appropriate to the family mourning, but then, with the passing of time, there were those who began to consider Earl Francis a resolute, and also a madman, not knowing the rapid inner ascent of his soul*".

Also, in the town of Zevio, various comments were circulating about the behaviour of the Earl, so good and generous, but also very strange and exaggerated by "religious mania". They could not understand how a rich and educated Earl, instead of spending time in mundane parties and chattering in the wine parlour, preferred to spend a lot of time in church, mingling among poor people. Some witnesses spoke of "strange sorties" of Francis. People said that they saw Francis, dressed in discarded clothes, following the door of some convent to consume soup and bread at the table of charity together

with the poor. Other times they saw him, dressed like a poor beggar, asking for alms for the friars of *Barana*, or doing menial jobs with simplicity and humility. This behaviour was judged as "strange". On the other hand, the choice that Francis will then make of joining a humble priest, to live as a poor in the service of the most miserable children, can be understood by allowing this remote heroic preparation, which had a logic with the dictates of the Gospel, but this could not be understood by the materialist world.

The Perez family watched and trembled. Especially his sisters, who loved and esteemed their generous, humble and affectionate brother, trembled of having no courage to judge him. But the dismay was great when Francis decided to strip off from all his possessions, to make himself poor among the poor.

They said: "*Our family has always lived Christian values, without showing off wealth. And attention to the poor has always been present in our thoughts. Charity and a dignified life can very well be reconciled. Nothing forbade our brother Francis from establishing a family and educating his children as our worthy parents had done. And if, then, he really intended to consecrate himself to the Lord why didn't he follow the noble example of the paternal uncles who chose two highly prestigious Congregations, such as the Rosminians and the Oratorians? "*

THE FRAGILE HEALTH OF FRANCIS.

From childhood his physical constitution had been undermined by diseases that had affected him with bronchitis and respiratory systems. Prudence would have advised him for a religious house, where food, clothing and environmental conditions had been less austere than those of the "Casa Buoni Fanciulli". And we know that, at least in the early days, St. Zeno in Monte also lacked even the basic necessity.

The Opera of the "Buoni Fanciulli", was just outlined, and revolved around the person of Fr. Calabria. The Opera hadn't a well-defined physiognomy - indeed many foretold failures and the ecclesiastical authorities, fearing catastrophe, "*stood by the window*". The great esteem and trust of Francis was placed only in God and in the holiness of Fr. Calabria!

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
HURDLES IN THE DIVINE PLAN

TWO SOULS AND ONE GOAL.

With the priestly ordination of Calabria on August 11, 1901, and his destination as curate at S. Stefano on October 06, 1901, The Earl Francis and Fr. Calabria continued to keep in touch. The Calabria family once had lived, on the ground floor of Palazzo Perez, in Corso Cavour.

He did, however, the commuter priest: curate service in Santo Stefano, returning home for lunch, and in the afternoon back to the parish for the oratory, again back home for dinner and rest. Without making any impossible obstacle, the distance between Corso Cavour and Santo Stefano still required a moderate walk, especially as it needed to be crossed four times a day, with cold, rain and snow. Moreover, the loss of time, altogether, was significant. So, thanks to diligent and practical friends, Fr. Calabria found a rented accommodation closer to Santo Stefano, but still beyond the River Adige, in Vicolo Fontanelle Duomo, n. 1.

On November 05, 1901, Fr. Calabria, his mother Angela, his sister Teresa with her daughter and, later, Mrs. Margherita Masina shifted to the new rented house.

The apartment was large and had six rooms: a kitchen, three bedrooms (one for his Mother Angela and Mrs. Masina, one for his sister Teresa and her daughter and one for Fr. John Calabria), another room used for the wardrobe and work, and finally he has an office for personal study.

It was the first time that Calabria family lived in such a spacious home. Mrs. Margherita Masina once lived a few meters from the Calabria house. Mrs. Masina's presence was a necessary help for his Mother Angela, who was seventy years old and was physically exhausted. Masina had worked at the house of the Balladoro Royal family. She gradually became friend with Angela.

At the time of the transfer, she was 65 years old and was living alone. She was a simple and outspoken woman, a bit grumpy, but with a golden heart. Every now and then she lets off steam*: "What do you think, Angela? Now that John has become a priest and you could start feeling good, he goes looking for these headaches of boys!* ". But then, and now he turned to Fr. Calabria, she changed her tone: *"If I win a lottery, I pay you all your debts ... but then, stop these boys*!"

Fr. John shrewdly knew how to break down that apparent hostility, not out of selfishness but of her inability to keep his unrestrained terrors under control. Presenting her new poor and abandoned boy, he told her: *"Masina, this child is an orphan. They abandoned him. What do you say, we take him or not?*" And the angry woman, with tears in her eyes, melted into effusions of maternal tenderness, hugging and caressing the child. Except then, on their first prank, bursting with new impacts: "*Go away! Can't you see reduced Fr. Calabria, suck blood? Go away*".

The two friends Francis and Calabria no longer lived under the same roof, nor was it easy to meet in the same church. But both had healthy legs, and there was no lack of opportunities to see each other and consolidate their deep friendship.

Fr. Calabria 's first pastoral duty in the Santo Stefano parish was to assist the boys in the oratory, in reality, on weekdays, there weren't many boys who attended the oratory (they never go to school, but were busy with work), but the presence of the priest was considered equally necessary. The oratory of Santo Stefano had a large courtyard, a theatre and a multipurpose room that also was served for the "schola cantorum" and the meetings of the parish

priest. In rainy and cold days, the room was not always available for the boys who remained outside and who are exposed to the rudiments. Fr. Calabria, as a practical person, immediately realized that it was necessary to create a covered space for these children. He prepared a plan and exposed it to the parish priest. "*Provided there are no expenses for the parish* "concluded the parish priest, "*I authorize you to carry it out*". Fr. Calabria immediately involved his friend Earl Perez who, having noted the usefulness of the only recreation centre for the boys in the area, undertook to provide the necessary material. Some workers of the parish had offered for the installation.

Fr. Calabria's style was always to involve the laity in his social projects. Within a short time, a spacious indoor playhouse was built. In his daily home visits to the sick, Fr. Calabria met many boys left to themselves. He approached them with tact. When became friends he invited them to attend the oratory. The number of boys increased day by day and the courtyard became lively with relaxed screams. In the opening hours Fr. Calabria is always in their midst, entertaining them with simple tricks, uplifting stories, riddles, etc. Sometimes, he organized sightseeing tours around the city or hiked up the hills. How many races, how many traps! And Francis, a live spectator of many poverty, was always close to Fr. Calabria, dragged by his friend's ardour. Sometimes they were able to have a free access, at other time had to pay the fee. Fr. Calabria wanted nothing from his wealthy friend, knowing that he had already been buried up above his hair in other works of charity. But it was Francis who offered from his side spontaneously. And so, a small share of Fr. Calabria was sufficient added to that from Perez. Meanwhile, the fire of charity lighted

brightly in the heart of the beginner Francis, who saw his future call more clearly defined.

We saw what Fr. Calabria and the Earl Perez did for the small chimney sweepers. But the activity of the chimney sweepers was, as they say, only the tip of the iceberg. Every day human miseries emerged; and the last victims were mainly the children. Fr. Calabria had his heart broken at night and day. Between prayer and occupation, he could not pretend to nothing, nor listen to the right-thinking people who said *"what do you want to do with it? The world has always been like this. ".*

It was, and still is, even today, the answer of those who want to live quietly without posing problems and committing themselves personally. But can a true Christian, a follower of Jesus, live happily blessed, closing his eyes to the miseries of his deprived brothers?

Fr. John Calabria's sensitive soul could not find peace. His mind was getting restless thinking about what he should do.

Meanwhile, in the small city of Verona the news ran faster, even without the means of communication of our day. People often talked about Fr. Calabria and his interest for the abandoned children, both in good recreation places and in popular huts.

Some acquaintances thought to warn and advise Fr. Calabria to be prudent:

"*But why are you getting into troubles for these brigands? Be satisfied to do the parish co-operator well, and leave the rest to those who are interested in*".

But Fr. Calabria commented with pain: *"How can I lose interest in those poor ones that Providence puts in my footsteps? They are individuals of the Lord, so needy! ".*

Obstacles and grumbling also arose in the walls of his home.

Poor boys are not different from all the other boys of normal families, on the contrary, very often, they can be ruder and more insolent. His mother Angela, an old woman as she was, no longer had the strength to look after them, and, old Masina, often lost patience. The two generous women puffed, screamed, waved, but then, a little grumbling and a little sighing, they tried to feed those hungry mouths and wash and patch their torn ragged clothes.

The difficulties increased to settle the boys at other Institutes. Fr. Calabria will say with a smile the reply of a Director of the Institute: "*Oh, listen a little*," he heard himself saying between the serious and the facetious, "*we must also have to say a nice 'no' to Rev. Fr. Calabria".*

For one boy, in particular, Fr. Calabria could not find any accommodation, due to his liveliness and bravado. But he didn't feel like getting rid of him and throwing him back to where he had been taken him from. He was forced to keep him at home.

Six years later in 1907, Fr. Calabria was appointed Rector in St. Benedetto al Monte, which is in the heart of the old city. Here he had a rectory, quite vast, though in poor condition. The space was good to keep some particularly needy children at home, whom no one

wanted to welcome. Clinging to the maximum, in the rectory could house five or six. And it was not necessary to look for them.

Francis, too, was put to pull the cart, not only taking out a few bank notes from his pocket, but rolling up his sleeves to look after those children. They arrived dirty, often ragged, shabby, above all unruly, accustomed to the happy freedom of the sidewalk, without school and without control. It was necessary to draw *"excellent Christians and honest citizens".* A word!

A year earlier, in 1906, his mother Angela became seriously ill. The attending physician had projected her life for a short time only.

If his mother had died, there was a risk that any unrealistic project of the family-home would collapse. Fr. Calabria and the Earl Francis Perez were near the bedside of his dying mother Angela. The two friends, consulted with their eyes and with the same feelings of trepidation and faith, had an inspiration: Why not ask for a sign from the Lord? Together with Earl Perez, Fr. Calabria formulated this prayer: *"Lord, if you want me to continue looking after the abandoned children, prolong the precious life of my mother by at least one more year".*

Many friends, even among the clergy, good heart or a sense of normal prudence, tried to divert Fr. Calabria from that commitment in which he had embarked. The counsels to desist flocked from all sides. There was no lack of amazement and anxiety on the part of the Perez family. Even the Bishop, it is said, was worried. To give strength and courage to the two friends, it was necessary that the Lord truly worked a miracle.

And, on time, the miracle happened. Against all human expectations, Angela began to improve and, after a few days, she was completely out of danger. Some might smile at the cry of "miracle" and would rather call it a "case" or a natural event. And yet, but this "fact" injected energy into the two friends and decided to continue along the path they had taken. The sudden recovery of Mother Angela is considered as a response from the Lord to the cry of their supplication.

So, the tiny Opera had to continue. Francis was close to Fr. Calabria, but he did not yet know what to do with his life, in which definitive way to start to live. He urged an answer from his confessor and spiritual director. But the Carmelite Fr. Natale guided him to wait and meanwhile, stay close to Fr. Calabria to give all the help possible. Francis Perez was forty years old. He heard various voices calling him. But he did not want to prevent the Lord. He worked, waited and prayed, alone and a lot with Fr. Calabria.

A witness, Luigi Borgo, sacristan of the small church of St. Benedetto al Monte, testifies:

"I remember that in the evenings, especially on every Thursday from 11.30 to 12.30-night, The Earl Perez and together with Fr. Calabria, spent time of prayer before the Most Holy Sacrament. I, on the other hand, being young, went to sleep ".

PEREZ PRAYED AND WORKED.

The number of children hosted at Fr. Calabria increased and many more insisted on being welcomed. In that small rectory a tough sharing is already fashioned.

Fr. Calabria and Francis wondered what would be the will of God about those children. They were uncertain if they had to insist on seeking Institutes to accommodate these children or to look for a more comfortable home for them.

Fr. Natale, confessor of both, insisted that it must be Fr. Calabria himself who has to provide for these children.

TO FIND A SPACIOUS ENVIRONMENT: BUT WHERE?

Francis pointed out that a house had been freed, in vicolo Case Rotte, in the parish territory of San Giovanni in Valle. The owners of the house were the Sisters of the Holy Family, and Francis was their administrator. The deal was soon combined, but he wanted to carry out an urgent and expensive renovation work and purchase the furniture. Fr. Calabria gave his friend Fr. Emilio Fabbro, 50 lire, so he could provide for beds, tables and more. We are in 1907 and, therefore, fifty liras were worth something, but certainly they were not enough to cover all the expenses. Fr. Calabria, with a disarming smile, joked with his friend: "*And bring me the rest*!"

And, who knows how, put forward a change, which will serve to celebrate the arrival of the five children and the two assistants. We

are certain that, to bridge the debts and cover the expenses, there was always the hand of Francis Perez.

"SMALL HOUSE" AT VICOLO CASE ROTTE.

And so, on November 26, 1907, after having recited the rosary in the small church of San Benedetto al Monte and having received the blessing of Fr. Calabria, a small group of boys, cold and wrapped up, each with his own bundle of laundry on the shoulder, walked towards the new *headquarters* with simplicity, without inaugurations ceremony nor the usual ribbon cutting, the OPERA of "Good Children" began in simplicity.

The following morning, Fr. Calabria announced this to his dear friend Fr. Pio Vesentini, a classmate in the school and apostolate among the sick: "*I give you a comforting news ... yesterday in San Giovanni in Valle a small house was opened: God so far has led things well; there are seven boys and Fr. Diodato Desenzani lives with them. I recommend you, help me with your prayer and then ... how the Lord will inspire you. You are the only priest with whom a formal participation has been shared so far. To the Lord I offered, if he wants to accept, this poor life of mine ... dear Fr. Pio, united in the Lord. Bye. Right now.*

Yours in Christ. Fr. John Calabria.

P. S. Pray so that I may love suffering".

In these few and simple lines, we do not find bombastic programs nor ambitious projects. Fr. Calabria obediently followed the divine Will. He gave himself trustingly into the hands of God, personally convinced of his own nothingness. At the end of the note, we observe

an outstanding hint of Fr. Calabria, and this will become hammering in his life, the price he will have to pay to let the Opera of the Lord live and grow: is to suffer. And to overcome the natural repugnance to suffering, he asked for the help of prayer. We will find this request for prayers in all the letters Fr. Calabria wrote to the individual religious or communities: "Pray that I may understand the gift of suffering!"

"BUT WHAT HAVE YOU, IN YOUR MIND AND HEAD?

Many friends and acquaintances asked Fr. Calabria: *"What are you planning to do?"*

He replied that he wanted to *"assist the poor and abandoned young people, otherwise they are destined to be exploited or oriented to evil path": to assist them "free of cost", to complete a schooling, to turn them into "good and smart Christians, good and capable fathers of families, good and honest workers, and capable of maintaining themselves with the decent work of their own hands*".

This, in a nutshell, he repeated to those who asked him about his intentions.

"*But how will you do this and what are your means*?", They insisted.

And here emerges another fundamental point of his program: *"The Providence of God will take care of us ... We must not rely on capitals put to use in the bank, nor on public appeals or contributions.*

Nothing to ask, but also nothing to refuse: to let the Lord choose who is worthy to become an instrument and minister of Providence ".

This was, a humanly imprudent and highly risky program. Many advised him that, if he really wanted to do the good of those boys, he should use some financial security; but on this point Fr. Calabria was intransigent, indeed, he conditioned his charitable action to the axiom: "*The Opera is willed by God. It is His creature, therefore, the means will come from Him*".

The boys, who are gradually welcomed into the house, were orphans or abandoned. No one was able to pay any fees. The heavenly Father *"who feeds the birds of the sky and clothes the flowers of the fields, even more will procure His children with clothing and food"* (Mt 6:26).

When someone pleaded to welcome some children into the house, the most convincing recommendation he could present was the certificate of greatest necessity and the state of abandonment.

There is a beautiful letter that attests this condition. It is written by a priest, to his dear friend, who asked him to welcome a child. Here it is: *"Very Rev. and dearest Fr. Carlo, my heart weeps to say that it is not possible for Bottura. If you knew, dear Fr. Carlo, how many requests of most pitiful cases, of creatures totally abandoned and in the midst of dangers are in the list. It only makes me cold to name them. I would like to extend my arms to everyone, but how is it possible? Certainly, my poverty prevents the entry of so many poor souls. Endorse me to the Lord and say that He should do all He wants with me, but let souls be saved. Bottura, for a house, is a pitiful but*

common case: he has his father who can pay and put him in some other Institutes. If you want, I can recommend him to the Artigianelli or Monza of Pavia and Milan. They are good Institutes run by the Sons of Mary, but something must be paid for.

Commend me to Jesus, say that He uses great mercy for me. In my poverty I always remember you together with your parish that I can also say mine.

Have a wonderful and Holy Feasts. With respect and affection, in Sacred Heart, Fr. John Calabria".

At that time there were no public assistances. That social understanding has been gained in recent years: the poor, the unemployed and the orphan were left to their fate. Today, in Europe, fortunately, there are so many social amortizations and public subsidies, even if, unfortunately, still large bands of "human waste" have to make ends meet with a completely inadequate subsidy.

CONDITIONS TO ASSOCIATE TO SERVE

To implement this program, we need volunteers to help him freely. He looked around and carefully chose people who seemed best suited to him. He was strict in sorting.

From them he demanded the most absolute docility and generosity, in everything and for everything. He did not aspire to be surrounded by crowds of followers: "*Few but good, and willing to occupy any office, however humble, because everything is great in the*

House of the Lord". Probably, at that time, he did not think of founding a religious Congregation in the traditional sense of the term. Perhaps he just wanted to be helped by some lay volunteers who had a deep religious spirit.

When, he realized that he needed people permanently bound by bonds of vows, he would form a group of generous and obedient lay people, ready to take up any task. He called them the *"friars of the twentieth century*" without special outfits, or external frills, but with solid virtue, true spirit of sacrifice, humble and docile. He wanted them to cultivate an essential inner life and to be faithful to the practices of piety in a discreet way. They had to make the private vows of chastity, poverty, obedience and abandonment to the Divine Providence, but never in a perpetual form. He thought that today's times required this freedom. "New times, new things - he said - but, new things on old foundations".

THE APPEALS ARE MANY AND THE HOUSE IS TOO SMALL

The "Good Children" continued in Vicolo Case Rotte for about a year. In the morning, they attended the municipal school and, in the afternoons, they spent in study, recreation and prayer. From May 1908, Fr Desenzani, co-pastor at San Giovanni in Valle parish, went to live permanently in vicolo Case Rotte. He was freed from parish service with the consent of his parish priest to assist the boys.

At the beginning of the summer of 1908, twenty-two boys already occupied in the house and others pressed to be received. By now the environment had become too narrow. They had to look for an even

bigger house. Fr. Desenzani, Francis Perez and Fr. Calabria set out to find a spacious house. So many possibilities faded in the face of various obstacles and refusals of the owners. Meanwhile, his mother Angela, exhausted from the hardships and from the past labours, died on May 08, 1908. A week later, as if it were a posthumous gift sent by this holy mother, they learned from the Advocate Coris, a friend of Fr. Calabria and Francis Perez, that the San Zeno in Monte building was for sale. Advocate Coris was the manager of the property and of the building belonging to Laschi family.

Fr. Calabria wrote: "*Dear Fr. Diodato ... I am told that there would be a beautiful house in San. Zeno in Monte. I'm going to see it today. And meanwhile we wait and pray*"

Francis Perez played an important role in the purchase of San Zeno in Monte building. Fr. Calabria himself revealed this, writing to Fr Desenzani on April 30, 1908: "*Of the presence of the Earl Perez - ne verbum quidem (not a word with anyone); because, it would hamper the Work of God. This is the foundation. This foundation would require one, two, three ... years* ".

And on May 18, 1908, he added: "*Around 5 pm I will come to San Giovanni in Valle, to go, together with Adv. Coris, to see the famous house of San Zeno in Monte. We will go with the assurance that, it is for us, if God would send means even if it costs 100 or 200 thousand lire; if not, no ... Dear Fr. Diodato, do not lose heart, because we are in an iron barrel: God, The Divine Providence is with us, what more can we desire?* "

The hour had struck. No time was needed. Fr. Natale intervened. He called the Earl Francis and told him: *"Sell your capital and buy San Zeno in Monte"*.

And Francis, blessed as an Easter event, ran to his sister, the Lady Bice in Cavazzocca, to buy some of his land. She accepted and anticipated the money that served as a deposit pending the sale deed. But the sum, even if large, was not enough. Other "Providences" accompanied the price.

And the contract was stipulated. San Zeno in Monte will become the new house of needy orphans; thus, it becomes the first true centre of “Casa Buoni Fanciulli”, (Good Children Home).

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE SECRET OF GOD’S WORK

THE FIRST HOLY RULES: A GREAT FOUNDATION

While waiting to move and settle in the new place, it was necessary to immediately find a temporary accommodation for the boys. The premises of Vicolo Case Rotte had become too cramped and hygienically poor. The summer appeared and threatened to spread infectious diseases. They looked for temporary

accommodation in the countryside. They found a farm house near Costermano, contrada Baesse (Verona).

On August 20, 1908, the happy contingent of boys and assistants got up early and walked to Baesse. It was a good stretch of road, about 20 kilometres, a trifle for the kids of that time. The household goods, loaded on two carts, preceded the boys. In the late afternoon, with songs, jerks and tumbles on the meadows, the marchers reached Costermano. A fabulous place for those kids who used to scratch around muddy streets and unhealthy alleys. The scenery is varied and full of colours: the deep blue of Lake Garda, the soft green of the sweet hills covered with vineyards, the faded grey colour of the placid Monte Baldo, the ochre yellow of the Adige river. The sparkling air that slides down from the mountains, the low and sweet murmur of the river, the festive song of the birds relaxes the tensions, oxygenates the lungs and restores the soul. Those twenty children of the Opera got settled in the farmhouse. The days passed calmly in an environment of constant adventure and joyful discovery. Fr. Diodato and the young Gigio (Luigi Adami) were inexhaustible in the genial initiative and in organizing excursions in the surroundings or boat expeditions.

One morning, Fr. Desenzani organized a trip to Ceraino: a village of few houses that winds along the left bank of the River Adige. When they arrived, the boys took off their shoes and began to wade in the dead pockets of the Adige. They were looking for flattened pebbles and were competing to throw them on the water, slapping the soft, sleepy river.

Around noon Fr. Calabria arrived unexpectedly together with the Earl Francis Perez. The two joined the festive group to have a packed lunch. After the frugal meal, the boys flew relaxed on the lawn. And Fr. Calabria, with a wave of his hand, held Fr. Diodato and Gigio (later Fr. Luigi Adami). He invited them to cool off with a glass of beer, under the arbour of a country guesthouse.

A simple picture of life, far from the city and its gossip. After a first sip of beer, timidly, Fr. Calabria said: *"I would like to read to you some notes I have written these days. They are the Holy Norms that we must observe, for our sanctification as components of the small house of Good Children. There are few Norms, which I put in writing, after having prayed a lot and getting advised by my spiritual Father".*

He took a school notebook out of his pocket (*we have this treasure in our archives*). He opened it and began to read in a calm and solemn tone. They were simple "Norms" that, one day, will serve as a proposal for the future Constitutions of the Poor Servant Brothers and Sisters of Divine Providence. The three, present, listened to the reading of those few lines with passion. They vibrated in harmony with the life program that was proposed by Fr. Calabria. They formed a small group of four people: two priests, a lay person engaged in the social field and a young seminarian.

Those who passed by would have mistaken them for four friends who gossiped about this and that. And instead, around that tavern table, with a mug of beer in front, the foundations of a great Opera were arranged. Before setting up human institutions, normally, commissions are created, projects are developed, and, above all, funds are assured.

The Works of God, on the other hand, are born in simplicity and humility, in a humanly impudent manner, because they follow indications and designs of a wisdom that does not come from human mind, but from the Spirit of God.

The beginning of the text opened with a motto, which will return to all of Fr. Calabria's future writings*: "First of all, consider oneself as brothers and, as such, love each other and help each other especially in the spiritual life".* And then, a simple, linear, faithful exemplification that literally followed the Gospel.

CHAPTER NINTEEN

HOME OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE

A NEST AT SAN ZENO IN MONTE

The building of San Zeno in Monte had already passed into ownership to Fr. Calabria, but could not yet be used because it was occupied by about thirty families. Fr. Calabria did not want to use coercive forms or solicit injunctions by the authorities. He decided to agree on the times and ways with the families concerned. He commissioned the parish priest Fr. Bonometti to probe the moods of the people. He let it be known that the boys, temporarily parked in Costermano, had to return to Verona to begin vocational training courses. Some families evicted the premises without creating

problems. But most did not want to hear reasons. "*If that priest wants to do good, let us and our children have it first*," they replied in chorus to the parish priest. Towards the evening, they convened an assembly in the tavern which also served as a dance hall. They decided to elect a delegation to go and serve four harsh words to that priest. They chose some women, among the most garrulous and belligerent. The following day, the shouting quartet went to the city. They entered the small church of St. Benedetto al Monte and waited for the religious service to end. Then they reached the priest in the sacristy and immediately clarified the reason for their presence.

Fr. Calabria listened to their complaints in silence. When all the topics had been dealt with, he replied with sweetness and understanding: *"I understand your difficulties. Indeed, it has been several days since I pray to the Lord to help you find a decent solution. But see, it is not I who want this Opera for the abandoned children, but it is the Lord. He knows that you are there too. So, be sure that He will not abandon you, rather will help you to find a good accommodation elsewhere. As far as my possibilities are concerned, I promise you all the help I need* ".

The calm words, persuasive, sincere dampened the fury of those frantic women: "*Listen, father, if it is the Lord who wants this Opera for orphaned and abandoned children, we definitely shall not put ourselves against Him. But at least give us a blessing to help us find another home soon.* "

"Oh, I give you this wholeheartedly. Be confident that the Lord will reward your generosity and availability. Tell everyone up there, that the Lord will help them ".

And the delegation returned home, languid and restrained. That little priest did not use menacing words to deceive them, nor had he used legal quibbles to intimidate them. And they went on commenting: "*If there were more people like him who are interested in the poor and take their difficulties to heart*".

Francis had the difficult task of finding a home for the poor tenants of St. Zeno in Monte. But he, with so much knowledge, and making use of his uniqueness, succeeded, with some difficulty, in freeing many knots.

Within a month most families found alternative better household. Thus, on November 5, 1908, the "Buoni Fanciulli" left Costermano to resume their way back. The journey was gloomy and tiring, because the place they left behind was beautiful and the people of the locality had surrounded them with human warmth and maternal attention.

In the late afternoon they arrived in Verona, but the carts with household goods did not reach. They got bogged down in some country path. The parish priest Fr Bonometti and Fr Desenzani were forced to find emergency accommodation for those twenty cold and fully tired boys. The next morning, Fr. Desenzani gathered the jumble, still dazed and numb, and dragged them along the *Via Scala Santa* to reach San Zeno in Monte. At the top, they fixed and stumbled to the entrance. They looked in amazement at that massive edifice, floating on the tophaceous hill; and it looked like a huge balcony extending out over the city of Verona.

ON NOVEMBER 06, 1908.

The existing structure was gigantic at a wonderful landscape. But, entering inside they instantly realized that everything was to be redone: shabby walls, putrid rooms, and piles of debris. They worked hard all day with brooms, shovels and wheelbarrows. Only a brief pause for lunch and dinner. The meticulous reporter of the time remembers the menu of the day: bread and cheese for lunch, *polenta* (corn flour) and cheese for dinner and water in abundance. At the end of the day, they all fell heavily on the beds with their aching tender bones. A frantic sleep made them intermittently turn within the blankets, waiting for the new day of work: they felt themselves to be architects and builders of their "*Home*".

FINALLY: "A HOME FOR THE GOOD CHILDREN".

Fr. Calabria disliked the name ‘boarding or orphanage’, because it recalled imposition, discipline, anonymity, separation between instructors and children. In this "House", instead, a family atmosphere had to reign. The assistants will be called "Brothers" and the women in charge of the kitchen and wardrobe are called "Sisters". A large and diverse family, but, always a *Family*.

For the restoration of the building they had signed a contract with a Verona company. But the demolition of the structures, which had settled over time, was entrusted to a team of enthusiastic young people, led by the untiring Fr. Desenzani.

A bustle of miniature workers, armed with pickaxes, shovels and wheelbarrows, knocked down, transported and accumulated mountains of rubble. From day to day they managed to get back some place that turned into a dormitory or a classroom. We had to hurry because winter was knocking on doors and an icy wind was filtering through the slits in the windows.

The word of the erection of this "House" for needy children spread quickly through the city and the province. Dozens of pressing and crucial requests piled up on the table of Fr. Calabria. At the beginning of the new year, the boys admitted in the family of “Good Children” *Buoni Fanciulli* were already eighty. In 1910, they numbered One hundred eleven. The choice was made following a strange criterion for ordinary people: the first on the list were the poorest, the abandoned, and the least recommended. In the "Rules" of the early years, this classification was already codified for the admission of boys: "*We must take those who are without parents or parents without faith, nor law, in a word those who have no moral security, and those who would one day be in the street; and their soul on the edge of the abyss. If any boy is abandoned, he is certainly accepted* ".

CHAPTER TWENTY

A NARROW PATH TO THE GREAT GRACE

THE LORD CALLS

The day when the “Good Children” entered at San Zeno in Monte, Earl Francis Perez was not present. Before joining the Opera, he wanted to get rid of all his affluence.

The land he owned in Cerea, Aselogna and elsewhere, had granted them anticipation to tenant farmers, granting delays with diluted instalments until 1924. He was in a hurry to strip himself off everything, to formally adhere to the Opera.

He thought of taking leave of his employees on St. Martin's Day, traditional date of reckoning and the closing of the agricultural year.

On the early afternoon of November 11, 1908, Earl Francis had the cart attached and took a walk with his sisters Lavinia and Maria. They toured the farms to invite all the employees to Zevio for an evening gathering, with chestnuts, wine and lots of fun.

At a hundred meters from the hamlet of Santa Maria di Zevio, the road passes a discreet stream ridden by a very narrow bridge with no bank rails, paved with polished stones. The happy little horse trotted well, when he put a hoof to a failure it missed the grip, overturned, and fell. Angry at the ugly figure, the horse got up nosily, with a jerk

tore itself from the carriage and flew away as free as the wind. Fortunately, the carriage did not fall into the water: it would have been innocent drowning. The two sisters were bruised and speechless against a hedge. Francis ended up under the carriage, with a leg jammed between the spokes of a wheel. He could not get out of it and had excruciating pain. The right leg was doubly fractured: shinbone and fibula were broken.

Lady Lavinia remained with her brother, supporting the poor unfortunate's head. And Maria Perez ran like crazy to ask for help in the village. Time passed, no one seemed to be found. Finally, one of their farmers arrived with a bullock cart. They spread the Earl Francis on a mattress. Painful jolts. Francis, gritting his teeth, murmured: "*This is nothing compared to what Jesus did for me*".

The surgeon at Zevio hospital did what he could to reduce the fracture and pull the stumps of the bones together.

Francis found himself, after his recovery, with a leg two centimetres shorter. But no one ever saw him limping. With awful fortitude, he tried to walk always erect with logical suffering.

The same doctor who handled the fractured leg without anaesthesia, heard no moans and said: "*But this man is a saint!*"

Francis, having left the hospital after a couple of months, was recovering at Zevio for some time.

In those endless weeks, he analysed the circumstances of that incident. He was sure that this was the definite sign that the Lord wanted him all for Himself.

But he did not suspect he was still finding obstacles on the road to his vocation. The most difficult objector was always Fr. Calabria. Fr. Calabria loved him, but welcoming that "*Earl* " among his poor seemed to him a luxury; and Providence would have been obscured. The world would have said: Good strength, dear Fr. Calabria! With an Earl, who still has so many assets in the public, the payments are insured! And this was not to be. Woe to make Providence look bad.

Fr. Calabria often went to visit his convalescent friend at Zevio. Although he reluctantly had the courage to tell his fiend on his face, to his dear Francis, that the House was not made for him, that those riches, which he still possessed, would have been a burden, that the Lord would not confer his Opera's security to anyone.

Fr. Calabria also confronted with his guide Fr. Natale and collaborators, Fr. Diodato Desenzani, Br. Massimo Besozzi and Bro. Gigio Adami. Bro. Massimo Besozzi (January 14,1866 – April 9, 1943) was one of the first collaborators of Fr. Calabria. Influential propagandist, trade unionist, and faceless speaker. Technical chief of the military arsenal. He worked with skill in every manual work. He was a blacksmith, a carpenter, a painter, a sculptor, and an architect. He was above all a very devout man. He was responsible for organizing the professional school of San Zeno in Monte.

Well, everyone agreed: Francis will always be a good friend, a helper, a family friend, but a member of the Opera, no!

In silence Francis accepted the decision of Fr. Calabria, with a lump in his throat and tears in his eyes. The enthusiasm, which, some time before, had made him tremble with joy, died out in the face of the insurmountable obstacle that the young friend Fr. John put forward to him.

"But then," Francis shattered, *"why, because I have four palanches (coins) I cannot consecrate myself to the Lord?*"

In reality the "*four coins*" were still many hectares of land and several houses, as well as apartments in the palaces of the ancestors. There were still too many assets that blocked the bare and narrow evangelical door.

In fact, Francis had thought of preserving goods to put them to good use and use them at the right time, to help the *Casa Buoni Fanciulli*, in times of difficulty. After all, it was a question of giving lasting financial support to those children who were in extreme need.

But the Gospel is different. Security must not come from people, but from God. Abandoning oneself to Him in everything, making oneself poor in the most genuine sense of the term, having nothing to rely on, eliminating all sources of income.

Francis was certainly not attached to riches. But the summit of complete shedding off still remained enclosed by a few clouds.

Francis suffered, also his friend Fr. Calabria agonized.

Francis knocked at the door but Fr. Calabria did not allow him to join.

We think it was Fr. Natale who dissolved the nod: *"If you, Francis, really want to serve God in the Casa Buoni Fanciulli, sell everything you have. You give it to the poor as you find better and so, poor among the poor, you will be accepted"*.

All doubts vanished, thinning like fog to the splendour of the sun. He had to make up his mind to make a radical cut from all material goods. He arranged the deal; sold land and houses, wrote relinquishing letters to the associations of which he was a part, cut all the bridges.

The voice of the Lord, through his confessor Fr. Natale, had been clear and convincing. And he listened and obeyed.

One day Jesus, said to a good young man who asked him what he had to do to obtain eternal life, proposed a more perfect way, he said: "*Go, sell everything you have. Give it to the poor. Then come and follow me "(Mt 19:21). That young man of the Gospel did not have the strength to do it.* And, the evangelist comments*, "he went away sad* ".

Francis, on the other hand, had the strength to get rid of "everything" and felt free and happy.

Fr. Calabria wanted him, but not his belongings. He wanted him, as poor like other brothers. And Earl Francis, having been released from every obstacle and greeted his family, entered the "Casa Buoni

Fanciulli" with the poor man's gift. He was an authentic Poor Servant of Divine Providence.

THE SELF EFASEMENT ON AUGUST 20, 1909.

We do not know in those days, what happened in the mind of Francis, after that radical decision.

Perhaps a little light is given in a letter he wrote to Fr. Calabria, on December 7, 1917: *"Ten years have passed since I had the fortitude to dedicate myself to these abandoned children. How good the Lord was to me, because my life was not worthy of this great grace".* So, he needed an extraordinary "*courage*" to take the last step. God granted it and the step was taken. He never regretted over his decisive and radical step.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CHALLENGE TO JOIN THE OPERA

A MOMENT OF REFLECTION.

At this point, we cannot continue our version quietly, as if the facts were a normal thing and he did not raise questions.

Why the Lord called Francis to consecrated life, why he chose the Good Children House? It was an Opera, and it was not yet an Opera. The holy Founder insisted on calling it, a "great" Opera. But what was great there?

Fr. John Calabria was certainly an exemplary priest, but he certainly did not stand out among the Verona clergy for science and prestige. The priests, even those who esteemed him for his virtue, knew his poor origin and scarcity in studies and his difficulty in passing out school exams.

Moreover, they were rather suspicious of that initiative for the boys who had fallen away, especially as Fr. Calabria did not want to know or learn human ways for financial aid or assurance to manage with fixed income.

The Bishop shook his head, trembling because of possible problems and consequent harmful publicity that would fall on the clergy, then targeted by the belligerent anti-clerical currents.

There was not great credit even much in the way of collaborators. There were two priests: he and another, Fr. Diodato, who was borrowed from the diocesan clergy. There was a student, Gigio, very promising person, well endowed, but still so young. Therefore, it was not a prestigious Congregation. It was not tested by time like many others, just to give an example, those of his uncle priests; the Oratory of St. Philippi and the Rosminians. Francis had classical maturity, he knew of Greek and Latin, and moreover he had a Master of Laws degree (LLM). It would have been useful, in case, with the Jesuits or another Order dedicated to the school. In Verona the Salesians and Stigmatines, with their esteemed schools shone by virtue and known for culture.

And with his qualifications, with his illustrious family, and with his possessions, could he not have entered the diocesan clergy where he would have been welcomed with open arms?

What consistency had that contingency of boys, mostly vulnerable in mind, education, character, and family origin? It was like jumping into a dangerous adventure.

His friends and admirers bombarded him with advice. The sisters and relatives opposed him. We too, perhaps, would have suggested "wiser" alternatives, less ruined, and already guaranteed by success and well planted. This Opera had no foundation of legality, neither civil nor ecclesiastical. Really any balanced mind had to look crazy,

playing all his life in such a precarious Opera. One can think normal, to go to help it, to support the activity of helping the orphaned children was well a good work; but why he has to join it?

Since Francis was an adult, and a man rich in experience, with a stunning resolve of motivation, and already full of various responsibilities, who knew how to hold with tenacity and honour, we cannot imagine him as a fragile soul, groping and dominated by the will of others. He could fight, he had determination.

Why did he make that choice? He certainly obeyed Fr. Natale, but it was not Fr. Natale who flattered him, or made him proposals first. Nor was Fr. Calabria, who loved him and esteemed him, kept him so long on the rope, making him a thousand hitches.

So? We adore the mystery of God, who speaks so amiably to the well-disposed soul, He downfalls resistance, and finally triumphs. For us humans have nothing more to say.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

SCANDALS FOR THE ARISTOCRATS

THE DISGRACES OF PEREZ FAMILY

The sudden disappearance of Francis from the world scenes, the news that he had gone to "commit suicide" among the brats of Fr. Calabria and reduced to poverty due to the total plundering of the earthly goods, all this produced a seismic wave among the sluggish and an accurate Verona aristocracy.

Some called him mad, others imprudent. Someone did not hesitate to call it a shame of the nobility. Perhaps some other, more thoughtful, did not comment, but many reflections. After all, that accented gesture appealed to everyone and someone signalled as reproach.

The most embarrassed were the family members. His brother Giovanni, speaking with friends and characters of his rank, even avoided naming him. The sisters Lavinia, Maria and Bice, pious and charitable noble women, but also aware of their class distinction, always very elegant and very experienced in Paris' models, experienced it as a shock. They loved Francis very much and he had always repaid them with equal affection. He was also the one who

had taken on the task of administering their assets and did so with skill and knowledge.

A LOVING LAVINIA PEREZ: OPPOSE THEN PROPOSE

In family conversations the sisters often talked about what was happening to their beloved brother.

Particularly the young Lady Lavinia Perez, the most energetic, decided to take the situation in hand.

She thought, in fact, that her brother, very religious and a friend of Fr. Calabria, had been cliched or badly advised in the choice of that hard life, not suitable to his precarious health condition. For this she presented herself in San Zeno in Monte, determined to raise a formal protest in the name of the whole Perez family.

Fr. Calabria welcomed her with kindness and listened to her in silence. When she finally fell silent, Calabria raised his eyes to heaven and, as if inspired, said:

"What I see!"

"What do you see, Fr. Calabria?", The young Countess asked curiously.

"I see the young Lady Lavinia Perez follow her brother Francis in the service of the Lord!"

"Oh no, this will never happen!" Lady Lavina snapped in horror; and, hastily greeting, she took leave.

She had gone up to San Zeno in Monte with belligerent intentions, but now she returned home in shock. She confided to her confessor, Fr. Natale of Jesus, that she was upset. She fell into a strong collapse. Her confessor Father Natale suggested her to go and spend some time at Miss Angela De Battisti, who lived in a small house in *San Giovanni in Valle* and was assisting the wardrobe work of the children at Fr. Calabria.

ON OCTOBER 14, 1910. NEW PATH OF LADY LAVINIA.

The Lady Lavinia was an intelligent woman, educated and always elegant in dress, in line with the latest creations of Paris' fashion. From her family she had inherited character strength, moral rectitude, solid religious faith and particular love for the poor, without getting confused with them.

After the death of her father, she lived very close to Francis, whom she loved, even though she did not fully approve of his visceral love for the poor and religious practices, which she considered excessive. She often scolded her brother for his too-modest dress and, above all, his confusion and mingling with the poor. We had to defend the decorum of our family and keep our distance from those who lived like plebeians. One thus understands her reaction to her brother who had stripped himself of everything and became poor, to live among the poor.

Given these premises, it is admirable and, I would say, bewildering the decision of this woman, who decided to follow the example of

her brother Francis and "*commit suicide*" as she did in the Casa Buoni Fanciulli, to assist and help poor, sick, and neglected children.

We know nothing of the whirlwind of thoughts, of inner struggles that the Lady Lavina had to undergo, before making that decision.

The greatest obstacles she had to overcome were her self-importance and integrities, remaining uncertain until the last breath.

Her confessor, to whom she had confided her intention to consecrate her life to the Lord, on November 03, 1910, she wrote: "Neither Fr. John Calabria, nor you, nor anyone else sent me to this House of Divine Providence, but I voluntarily, better say, conducted by the Divine Grace. It was hard for two or three days, because I was afraid I could not withstand my precarious health, and now it has already lasted a month, and although deprived of all the comforts I had at home, in this House of God, not only I am fine, but also I have improved in health. Moreover, Jesus began to make me feel that heavenly peace of which the Apostle says: "Peace of God, which surmounts every understanding". This peace then, which Jesus began to make her feel and taste, will increase in the same way as her generosity with which she will follow Him. From all this she can apply to herself those consoling words that Jesus said to the Apostles: "It was not you who chose me, but I chose you". Yes, it was not Lavinia Perez who chose Jesus to espouse her soul, but it was Jesus who, out of His infinite mercy, chose Lavinia's soul as His beloved bride.

Ten days later, on November 14, 1910, after selling her goods and donating the proceeds to the benefit of the "Casa Buoni Fanciulli"

activities, she presented herself at San Zeno in Monte to make a formal request to Fr. Calabria.

"Father," she told Fr. John, "I ask to be accepted, in charity, in the Opera".

The young Lady Lavinia wore a modest but decent dress. she did not run away from the world out of romantic disappointment, but she wanted to be forgotten in order to sanctify himself.

Fr. Calabria understood that this Countess, helped by the powerful Divine Grace, had managed to dominate her pride. He then wanted to test her and, distractedly, said to her:
"Young Countess, I need your charity".

"Say, Father!"

"We were without brooms. Would you like to go and buy one in Piazza Bra?!"

The Lady Lavinia, even though she had managed to dominate her nature, was still a woman of the Verona aristocracy and well known in the saloon bars of the most refined Verona city square. After a moment of hesitation, with a pale face but marked and determined features, she replied: *"I'm going, Father!"*

She went, looked for the shop and brought the broom home under her arm. A heroic gesture that marked a turning point in the life of the Countess Lavinia.

She was accepted among the collaborators of Fr. Calabria. She lived in absolute poverty, never complaining about the inconveniences and deprivations of everything she once had. She adapted to a simple, poor, and hidden life. She tried to make herself useful in the humblest jobs, which in her house were reserved for service personnel. In contact with poverty and misery, she had no time to recline in thinking about herself.

And she regained her serenity. She felt gratified and well placed in that simple and poor environment. She informed her confessor of the regained peace and expressed her desire to consecrate her life to the Lord, in the service of the poor brothers.

"One day," said Fr. Calabria, "while eating a slice of polenta and cheese with taste, Sister Lavinia exclaimed simply: "Father, I believe that I will not go to heaven, because I am enjoying this food here on earth. "

"Yet", continued Fr. Calabria, "there were not many comforts and from the windows of their house emitted flow of air that made one shudder".

The personal physician of the Perez family had predicted that the Countess would not last even a week in that place. Instead, despite her delicate body constitution, Sister Lavinia enjoyed relatively good health and lived for another ten years. Emulating the examples of her brother Francis, she preferred the humblest services for herself. With simplicity and joy, she alternated between the kitchen and the sink for washing.

She multiplied the prayers and penances so excessively as to cause the intervention of Fr. Calabria who advised her and, at times, commanded moderation.

Her main virtue was holy simplicity, combined with great charity and kindness in relationships, and a prompt obedience to Fr. Calabria, who told the novices: "*When Sister Lavinia was in agony, by now at the end, I went to see her in Casa San Benedetto. She no longer spoke and no longer opened her eyes. I called her in vain. Then I said to her: "By virtue of holy obedience, open your eyes!" With an effort she opened them and immediately locked them up* ".

At that moment all the bells of the Lamberti tower were ringing for the eventual ceasefire that put an end to the First World War.

It was November 4, 1918.

LADY MARIA AND BICE, SISTERS OF FRANCIS PEREZ

We also believe it appropriate to present the other two sisters of Brother Francis Perez: The Countess Maria and the Countess Beatrice (Bice).

The Countess Maria, after having learned the basics of knowledge at home, had an education and training at the "Angeli" college in Verona. Parents and teachers never complained about the conduct and application of the girl. She, too, although good opportunities had presented herself, had given up the idea of getting married to, and

had dedicated herself to housework and to the assistance of her brother Cesare, who was always ill, and to Francis.

Freed from her duties as a bride and mother, she dedicated her time to parish works under the guidance of Fr. Giacomelli. With the parting of Francis and Lavinia, a great void was created in the Perez family and much more in her heart. But it strengthened the fraternal affection by going often to St. Zeno in Monte, to visit his sister Lavinia and his brother Francis.

It was up to her to take over the assets alienated both by Francis and by Lavinia, so as not to waste Perez's assets. And she felt in a sense pushed to support in helping the "Casa Buoni Fanciulli".

At her death on 11 February 1913, Brother Francis found himself the heir of all possessions. The proceeds of the sale were used to buy the villa of San Benedetto (under San Zeno in Monte), which would become the first House of the Poor Servant Sisters, where they began an Opera in favour of children, too small to be received at the brothers of San Zeno in Monte.

Francis' other sister, Beatrice (or Bice), was the third in the family. At an early age, she was married to Earl Cavazzocca. After a few years of marriage, her husband died and she was widowed and childless. Desirous of maintaining the prestige of the Perez house, she gradually acquired the property of Francis and Lavinia.

Freed from family obligations, she devoted all her time to the religious and social works that were being organized in Verona.

She was the *first president of the Catholic women of Verona* and then, and later on, *of the young women's protection*, in collaboration with the Countess Elena da Persico. On the death of her sister Lavinia, she thought she should replace her among the Poor Servants Sisters, but Fr. Calabria advised her to wait and continue her charitable and apostolic work.

But she too made a heroic gesture. She emptied herself off all her possessions, leaving them part in the San Silvestro Institute and part in the Opera of the "Fanciulle Povere", founded by Msgr. Fritz and the Faggian sisters.

She lived poorly as a guest in the house she had given. About her they wrote: “She was a woman of perfect inner and outer balance, aware of doing God's will in charity towards her needy neighbour, up to the total donation of her goods, without asking for a counterpart esteem or gratitude, even in the hardest moments of her life. Her spiritual asceticism went hand in hand with charity. Convinced as a poor and orphaned child, she lost along the way, the cleric whose tuition she paid for to reach the goal of the priesthood. She loved in the only way with which one can love God. The most beautiful praise was expressed by her brother Francis, who in his little memory of her death wrote in his own hand in pencil: "Very poor death, with nothing!"

Fr. Calabria, who had followed her on her journey to holiness, called her *"a graduate of the Gospel".*

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BROOM AND WHEELBARROW TO SANCTITY

A NEW LIFE

Francis already knew what he would find in San Zeno in Monte where, for less than a year, more than a hundred boys lived. Francis, already used to climb there almost every day along with Fr. John, who continued as rector in San Benedetto al Monte.

The old building of San Zeno in Monte, reduced in poor condition, had oozed and spent a lot of money. Francis had given them a lot of money, but not he alone. It was everyone's sweat. Apart from the paid masons, builders, the boys and the brothers worked there: Fr. Diodato, Bro. Gigio and Bro. Massimo Besozzi took on great efforts.

In 1910, the church of San Zeno in Monte was rebuilt. The consecration took place on the day of the Assumption, with the first communion of some "Good Children".

In 1911, Fr. Calabria definitively left the rectory of St. Benedict to settle in San Zeno in Monte.

The number of boys received in the House had increased in number. They needed new classrooms, dormitories and, above all, laboratories for the boys to acquire a trade.

The project is prepared by the technical team of Bro. Massimo Besozzi and the work began. After a few months, everything had to be suspended due to lack of means.

"All of us, of Casa Buoni Fanciulli", commented Fr. Calabria*, "are in the House of God, and this Divine Master thinks of everything. In difficult situations he looks at us, smiles at us and tests our faith, then, if we are generous, to do his divine designs. ".*[3]

FROM PALACE TO A SCREEN PARTED AS ROOM.

In this precarious and under construction situation, how was Francis' new life?

No more spacious and comfortable rooms, no more obliging waiters always ready to take the command of the "master".

No one would make the bed for him. He would provide for cleaning. Rather! He too, like all the brothers, had to do everything to everyone, smear himself to toil.

An eyewitness, who lived in those years and in that situation, told: *"The House was small, windows without glass, shabby walls, shaky doors, all open to the four winds, to the cold, to the frost, and to the snow. Everything had free access, even the rain... "*

[3] Scritti, *a don L. Pedrollo*, 17.09.1921

The lighting was oil lamps. During the First World War (1915/18), we had only candles.

The Brother left the bed at four-thirty in the summer, at five in the winter. He looked after himself and his own things and provided for the spiritual nourishment, with prayer and other devotions.

Then he went back to his corner, where he had his bed just protected by a curtain, to assist the boys in the alarm clock and in the first cleaning. With the same boys he attended Mass.

He hurriedly went for breakfast, and for his duty of assistance in school, laboratory, and courtyard. He paid attention, vigilance, availability, solution of small, but continuous problems, as he was in service for 24 hours of the day and for 365 days of the year, with one more sometime of the year to substitute.

But in the evening, when the students were put to bed, the Brothers took turn to church for the visit to the Most blessed Sacrament and spiritual reading.

And the food? Plenty of polenta, a little rationed bread, soup only at midday, meat only on solemnities. Francis, once was used to the "gifts" of the best chickens, heels, pharaohs, with the cooks who, from day to night, took care of a choice of cuisine, with frequent guests and parties, pre-made wines, delicacies and so on. But now he is here with the usual dish of polenta and a microscopic broth: mostly well-watered. Luxury was wine, coffee, and even bread at will.

But Francis did not regret on anything. Despite he really had nothing left; he was astonished and moved by the prodigies of Providence which, without human resources, provided.

POORLY YES, BUT PROVIDED.

How royal was his costume? He too, like his sisters, used the best tailors in the world; all tailored, fine fabric, fashion style, and assorted wardrobe. Now, Francis will never again wear a new dress. His clothes will be those set aside, given as gifts, but not always suited to his size, and often patched. Clean, yes, oh, so there was nothing to say, but you had to count them because there wasn't much for replacement.

His work? All that was needed: gatekeeper, sacristan, assistant to the boys, gardener, wiper in his spare time, passionate guardian and attender of toilet cleaning. And let's get rid of the usual tiled and signed toilet promotions with the thousand trinkets with which the advertising, shampoos, lotions, perfumes, and brand soaps oppress us.

And Francis enjoyed an intimate and complete peace, like a shipwrecked man who finally reached the port.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

SELF EFFACED FOR GOD

THE HIDDEN SEED

But what made this Opera so great, as Fr. Calabria was defining in his intimate writings and familiar conversations with his collaborators? The House was not so great, nor were the students so numerous. Nor was the "Governing body" numerous or humanly qualified. Therefore, Fr. Calabria had done well to find the most important pillars elsewhere.

Here are the unquestionable characters who were chosen to take over the nascent and "great" Opera. There is, even today the sculpted names on a marble stone, that has not gone off course.

PERPETUAL OFFICERS

Of the Good Children Home "St. Jerome Emiliani".

The Absolute Master- on whom we depend on everything is: **Our Lord Jesus Christ.**

Mistress: **His most holy Mother, the Immaculate Virgin.**

Cashier: **Blessed Joseph Cottolegno**

Councillors: **St. Joseph, St. Vincent de Paul,**
St. Cajetan Thiene, and don Bosco.

Secretary: **St. Joseph Calasanzio**.

The components of the House: **The Poor Servants**.

With these points of support, including the Poor Servants, the Opera could also be called *"great".*

But what did those poor servants represent in the well-structured architecture of the Church?

They did not constitute a religious Congregation, nor a Pious Union, nor an institution approved by the hierarchy. And yet, even in the absence of a juridical dress, both Fr. Calabria and his collaborators knew well what the Lord called them and the precise role of an ecclesial family.

They already had very simple, essential, very demanding rules. Already, after a period of preparation, the religious made vows of: Chastity, Poverty, and Obedience, to be renewed every year on the feast of the Immaculate Mother. A fourth vow was also introduced: it is the *total Abandonment* in the hands of Providence. And this was like the evangelical distinction of the Opera. The vows, according to the agreements, were to expire on December 08, on the feast of the Immaculate Conception.

Private vows, of course. No legal connection with the ecclesiastical parameters. Not because it was not wanted, but it was not granted, due to the small number.

Private vows, therefore, were not binding by the Code of Canon Law, and were all the more precious because they engaged the person of the Brothers before God and his own conscience.

Even from this point of view, if the Opera had failed, Francis, like all the others, would have had neither a roof, nor a plate of soup: an absolute risk, free, audacious blind leap into the void.

But this gave no concern to anyone, much less to Francis. Beyond the vows, there were the commitments common to all the religious: daily Mass, meditation, Rosary, spiritual reading, two times examinations of conscience, morning and evening prayers, Chaplet of Divine Providence, monthly recollection, annual spiritual exercises, spiritual report to the superior, never-ending work: free and full availability for each assignment or service.

Days, months and years passed. Francis never had any second thoughts. He aimed to deepen in practice what he had gladly sought and accepted from the beginning.

Here is, among other spy of his state of mind, a passage from a letter written to Fr. Calabria on December 07, 1927:

"Today is the nineteenth year that I, by the grace of God and of the Holy Immaculate Virgin, was admitted to make my vows of Chastity, Obedience and Poverty, as well as of total Abandonment in

the hands of Providence. For *the past seventeen years I was admitted to the renewal of my vows. Now I have reached the nineteenth year, in which, God willing and if you believe I am worthy, I will renew my vows again".*[4]

Thus, when, in 1932, having experienced all the necessary practices and drafted the Constitutions, the Bishop of Verona erected the Opera to a Religious Congregation of diocesan jurisdiction, for Brother Francis nothing changed. He exulted in the Lord, because the ecclesiastical authority had officially recognized the Charism of the Opera, but he already had been living it fully.

[4] POSITIO, *o. c.,* p. 683.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

DESIGNED TO BE A SAINT

SIMPLE AND HEROIC LIFE:

"*From the small group of pioneers of love, emulates the first Christians of the apostolic era. A new greatness rises, of a higher order, which makes us feel a sense of admiration for them and a confusion for us* ".

This was expressed by Fr. Giovan Battista Tomasi, The Superior General of the Stigmatine fathers, who had seen the improvement of the church of the Lourdes on the Torricelle, a new work with the contribution of Earl Perez's family.

On October 13, 1912, to stimulate his confreres to embrace religious life with enthusiasm, Father Tomasi presented the lifestyle of this small group of generous souls, who had gathered around Fr. John Calabria.

"*Oh! Yes, my dear brothers, the history of Christianity shows us all through the centuries generous souls, who have sought, desired, and loved what the world abhors as their sacrifice. And, in our days there are examples. To see this, we must not go very far. Just let us go to our San Zeno in Monte. There, in that Institute which arose in silence and anonymity, we see people who have made themselves the most perfect sacrifice. They sacrificed their possessions, their comforts, and their sure hopes that the world offered. To see them so humble, so*

poor, and so careless of themselves, it would seem to the human gaze worthy only of compassion, but on those ruins produced by such heroic and yet so voluntary annihilation, we see a new greatness of higher order rising up which makes us feel a lively sense of admiration for them and confusion for us and also for those who do not share their living faith, are impressed, stimulated and admired".

Although Fr. Tomasi did not openly name Brother Francis Perez, it is certain that he intended him. It is true, there were also other people in San Zeno in Monte who had left work, family and positions of responsibility, to consecrate themselves completely to God, at the service of the brothers: *Massimo Besozzi*, engineer, head of the military arsenal, trade unionist and journalist; *Giovanni Marchi*, employed by the insurance corporation "La Cattolica" of Verona; *Alessandro Fenzi,* a famous glass artist and versatile technician in every craft work; *Pietro Carlini*, import-export of wine trading between France and Italy; *Alessandro Podavini*, an excellent shoemaker; *Luigi Borgo*, book binder; *Angelo Faccioli*, general and music teacher, and many others. But, the reference to Francis Perez was doubtless.

The effort practiced by Bro. Francis to live unnoticed, to be almost buried in the soil of his nothingness, and to vigilant in the practice of "*denying oneself* ". He could not hide himself fully to the publics of Verona.

In fact, there are not very many testimonies gathered around his holiness. But those few written or handed over, are extraordinarily supportive. We shall present some fragments here.

TESTIMONY OF ST JOHN CALABRIA.

The most valid witness of the heroic and evangelic life, lived by Bro. Francis, is that of Fr. John Calabria.

He knew the heart of Francis personally and, he normally respected his desire for concealment, but Fr. John Calabria did not fail to proclaim his virtues. Fr. Calabria used to surprise Perez out of every way; "*There is only one Bro. Francis* ".

In the first days after his entry in the Opera, Fr. Calabria defined him thus: *"He is a chosen soul. He has the virtue of detachment".*

Still referring to Brother Francis, Fr. Calabria used to tell the confreres: *"That person, when he dies, will take direct flight towards the heaven. If he had lived in the Middle Ages, or in other times, he would have been honoured as a living saint on earth. It is easy to say! But to think that he could be in the world with horses, carriages, and servants! On the other hand, he also came to suffer. Poor Francis Perez, he has nothing left. He too is poor like us".*

In a letter of July 12, 1923, to Fr. Luigi Adami, Fr. Calabria addresses a greeting to all the students and other brothers, "*the first among the many, to the saintly Bro. Francis (Perez), who with his life enlightens me so much* ".

Fr. Calabria, younger than Francis Perez, treated him with confidence as a very dear friend and sometimes gave him some mischievous shooting.

One day he called Bro. Francis Perez and told him: "*Let's go to Zevio to pray in that chapel you had built*". In a cart, Francis stooped in the bottom, so as not to be recognized.

But the people, welcoming the two visitors, began to applaud. Fr. John Calabria made a sign to the people to applaud Brother Francis, and the later fixed his eyes to the ground confused.

Sometimes, always in a cart along with Fr. Calabria, they met in the city their common acquaintance who used to take off the hat. Fr. Calabria, promptly comments: *"Francis, look that man greeted you".*

And Francis: "*No, Father, he greeted you*".

Fr. Calabria once took him along to the Carmelite seminary of Adro, (Brescia) where he was very familiar.

In presenting Brother Francis to the students Fr. Calabria said: *"This is Earl Perez who works miracles: the vine barrels were empty and in an instant they became full."* Imagine Francis! He nailed his eyes to the ground, red with embarrassment, until the end of the sermon. And the beauty is that, this fact, it seems, had really happened at San Zeno in Monte.

It seemed that Francis even nourished himself with humiliations, even though, for the law of nature, he could not remain indifferent to himself.

As an example, one evening in May 1910, while Fr. John Calabria, discussing with some Brothers, entered Bro. Francis and immediately Fr. Calabria called him out: "*Eh! at times it seems to me that he remains dumb, when something is commanded to him* ". Francis was shocked, but not resentful; in fact, as the conversation melting, he approached Fr. Calabria to kiss his hand, smiling blissfully.

Another time Fr. Calabria was walking on the terrace with some religious. A boy turned with his kite. Suddenly, Fr. Calabria grasped the boy's thread and handed it to Bro. Francis to dedicate himself to that innocent game. And the mature Earl obeyed with simplicity. But he does not have the ability of the boy, and here he is skipping to keep at height the kite that continually threatened to fall to the ground. He continued to look like a boy and blandly, until Fr. Calabria asked him to give up.

It seems that the two saints understood each other in a sphere that prevents us from understanding.

One day, the two friends were in the courtyard. Fr. Calabria ordered a group of young religious to make the circle around Brother Francis Perez and sing, on the tone of the Litany: "*San Francesco, Ora pro nobis*… St. Francis Perez, pray for us".

WITNESS OF LUIGI PEDROLLO

Another precious eyewitness is from Fr. Luigi Pedrollo successor of Fr. Calabria in the leadership of the Congregation.

Fr. Pedrollo knew Perez for fame when he was in the Vicenza seminary. Among the Vicentine clerics there were ample talk of that Earl, whose name was so illustrious and so rich, that he had freed himself off all his possessions to enter the humble and unrecognised Opera with Fr. Calabria.

Many clerics, who had served in the military service in Verona, reported in great detail that, going to San Zeno in Monte to confess with Fr. Calabria, they had noticed that resigned gentleman, often in the church absorbed in prayer, and at times committed on cleaning, with broom and a wheelbarrow. It didn't take long to realize that this was the famous Earl Perez.

When Fr. Pedrollo joined the House, on August 24, 1914, he found himself living in continuous contact with Brother Francis Perez and was able to appraise him in person. We preserve some letters written by him and finished on the day of the Assumption in 1983. Fr. Pedrollo still had lucid and detailed memories. He does not tell any sensational facts, which in any case, in the religious life of Francis, are completely lacking.

Rather, he gives an overall opinion of admiration. We collect some significant sentences, and flash examples of a lifetime:

- *"I have framed him as a person of light in my mind".*

"He was available to doing any humble work."

- "He was remarkable to take care of flowers. He knew them by name. He knew how to grow them. He was happy when he could bring some flowers to Church ".

- "His health was weakened by tuberculosis infection, which was not hazardous. He passed times in bed, or withdrawn. But he moved around. His goal was the Chapel or the study office of the Father. These environments were both sacred to him".

"When assistance was needed for the boys, the brothers often turned to the help of Bro. Francis, whose word was almost always a nice one. "

"I remember him regularly, going to the church in the afternoons and there was absolute silence. But after some time, here someone coughed with some insistence. That cough revealed the presence of Brother Francis Perez. I felt a tightening in my heart to hear him cough. I had the feeling of going to lose him soon. And this worried everyone. We knew we had an angel from heaven lowered to earth".

"Everything in him is serene and his presence speaks everything. Brother Francis seemed to be an open door that is placed on earth in contact with heaven. The words of Jesus to Philip sums up in Perez: Philip, he who sees me, sees the Father. I use this phrase, but I feel I can do only this far, because from all the activity, from the whole person of Brother Francis, shone through holiness."

"Whenever his health permitted, he was looking for some work. He wanted to make himself useful. He offered to assist the boys in the workshops. He acted with a keen sense of responsibility. Everything he did was sure that he did it well; to the point of scruple."

"I never saw in the cloakroom any dress that indicated the noble origin of Francis. He always dressed poorly, but with cleanliness and tenure. Not the dress communicated the nobility to Francis, but he

communicated something unusual, noble to the dress, so that a singular attraction radiated around him. I remember that canvas military uniforms had been donated by the military hospital. They were extremely simple. He did not look good wearing them. Here they were distributed to the older boys and also to the brothers who wanted them. Francis was among the first to wear such a dress, without making any changes to it. This edified and pained me at the same time. That dress did not seem suitable for him."

"Whatever clothes he wore, even for work, if he was called to the reception by some family member or acquaintance, he went there as he was, without changing. He was poor, he wanted to be poor and everyone thought him poor. That military suit, so unfitting, remained fixed on my mind. He did not show to catch the attention of any, beautiful or ugly was the figure he would have made".

"During and immediately after the World War, among the boys who entered the house, many were affected by ringworm on the scalp. Francis presented to take care of them. One must consider, that it might have cost him a lot to overcome the repugnance for this office which lasted for a few years. In this regard, some others recall that the boys had given him a nickname: "El veceto dei pioci" (the old man of the bugs), that is, the Brother who cleared the poor little heads from the nauseating ringworm or the disgusting parasites. He did this "specialised" treatment with patience and delicacy, so as not to annoy, but above all, chattering calmly, without showing any wonder ".

Fr. Luigi Pedrollo continues*: "I remember having observed him several times while cleaning up these poor boys. I never saw him disgusting but understood by Christian compassion for the boy who carried such humiliating diseases; he cleaned with serenity, with true*

love, with tenderness that I would say maternal. He knew and felt that he loved them as a child of God. "

- Fr. Pedrollo continues, "Perez spent several hours in the study of Fr. Calabria. There he conversed or ran errands, prayed and read. His presence left Fr. Calabria free to do whatever he wanted. Don Giovanni enjoyed seeing him close. If a visitor came in, Francis, bowing, went out and stayed in the adjoining chorus to pray".

- "He was very fond of common practices. He did not abstain from it, unless, seriously sick. He immersed himself in prayer. I am very aware of his participation in the Perpetual Rosary, which he himself presided, with the volunteer boys, for one hour a month ".

- "He prayed a lot even alone and in silence".

- "Sometimes a fervent expression came out that enchanted; he believed himself alone, but someone, unseen, listened ".

"In 1917 I fell ill with T.B.C", continues Fr. Pedrollo*, "and I was sent to my home to take care of my health. Mine was a country house, without toilets. Brother Francis accompanied me, who adapted very well to the total lack of those comforts to which he was never accustomed. Back in S. Zeno, he wrote me uplifting and encouraging letters, which did me a lot of good".*

With the boys he couldn't run or play given his age. But he was with them talking, arranging game tools, was providing a thousand needs. It did not inspire awe or fear, he gave great confidence. He had a paternal way of making an observation, a call, giving advice, and suggesting a job. Everyone was happy. His presence was not difficult, but appreciated, desired, and loved ".

"Fr. Calabria entrusted him for some time with the role of Master of the novices. Francis exercised this obedience with deep humility, asking me, very young before him, to give some sermons to the

novices and then praising them with the Father, without any sense of jealousy ".

"He never talked about his past. From others it was known, certainly not from him, that San Zeno in Monte had been bought with his money. According to him, he had done nothing. He said it was for the pure charity of the Opera if he was hosted in the house. He considered himself unworthy, the least of the community. He did not accept any speciality. No exception for food, despite his delicate health. No one had to take care of him. He was completely dead to himself. "

"If instead of a canonical process the voice of the people were enough, Brother Francis should be proclaimed a saint immediately. But in Heaven, I consider it undoubtedly. The Lord placed him among the saints ".

"Once, a somewhat insistent Brother wanted to bring Francis to talk about the times when Earl Perez was in the world. And Francis promptly said: "the Earl is dead".

- "I remember a photo that takes him in a surprising pose for him. It was Fr. Calabria who wanted so. And Francis, very humiliated, but obedient, willingly submitted to the order ".

In Perez's photographic album we find an emblematic photo: Francis, seated in a hieratic saintly pose, with his left hand resting on his chest and his right hand holding a large crucifix. His humble gaze fixedly contemplates Jesus. All he needs is the halo. Certainly, Francis would never have endured being taken up like this. But Fr. Calabria ordered so, and accommodated that to himself. And Francis made no objection. The photo dates back to 1934, three years before his death, and it was taken in Fr. Calabria's office.

OTHER TESTIMONIES

Writing a biography of Brother Francis is not a simple thing. Since Earl Francis decided to put himself under the spiritual direction of Fr. Calabria and to serve the poor children in San Zeno in Monte, we have not found in him extraordinary facts that deserve to be reported. It almost seems that he wanted to cancel himself, to free himself completely of "*what is appreciated in the world, of what is valued and coveted, and to choose the bare cross of Christ*".

But precisely because of his annihilation, or "madness" as his sisters said, the light of the new man stands out, silent and shining, purified and dressed in the grace of the Holy Spirit.

"It was a real joy for him to participate with Fr. Calabria at the holy hour fixed in the night between Thursday and Friday of each week. When sickness forced him to bed, he joined spiritually with the others present in the Church".

"The filial and tender devotion to the Most Holy Virgin was made concrete in him in the effort to imitate her virtues; therefore every Marian celebration served him, not only to rekindle in his soul the ardent devotion for Mary, but it was an incentive for him to conform his customs as much as possible following her example ".

"His piety and his faith were a continuous exercise of love".

"His attention was to serve others, without weighing or making himself boring, always humble and hilarious, he also carried out his services to the little ones".

Brother Carlini, a generous but impetuous man, was repugnant to wash and clean certain filth that was found on the heads of children

collected from the street and dirt. He saw Francis smiling between sores, infectious wounds and lice. He animated and won: "If Earl Perez does it, I too can do." And he too followed without hesitation.

- "At the beginning, refined as he was in the most urban ways, he collided with the vulgarities exchanged between those boys who had just arrived from the street. But, although quivering, he won and tried to educate them with tolerance and patience ".

- "Some Brothers, irritated on certain peevishness and defiance of some hard heads, resorted to Fr. Calabria. But Fr. Calabria did not lack the answer: Do as brother Francis does. And addressing Francis, present, he added: is it not true, Brother Francis? When Francis can no longer stand this exaltation, he goes to Church to pray? Confused to be so treacherously placed on the candlestick, Francis said: I should do so, Father. But he really did."

- "Community life, practiced by Brother Francis, reminds me of the holy companions of St. Francis of Assisi and has all the flavour of the Franciscan Flowers".

- "Simple and affable in speaking and in dealing, everyone was comfortable with him and did not feel the least disturbed to find himself in front of an Earl and a highly educated person".

- "I do not remember that in the community he participated in any altercation or showed dissent regarding dispositions or events that occurred in the House.".

- "He admired and esteemed the work of the Brothers, but never got involved in the affairs of others; and expressed his opinion only if requested. This he did with a great sense of humility, declaring himself a good-for-nothing and expressing (in writing) his sincere displeasure for the esteem and respect that his brothers had for him ".

- "While he did not willingly accept the praises addressed to him, he did not run short such words to others, especially to those who, as he said, imprinted in new works that fervour and zeal with which they were full, or kept with truly religious spirit the prestige of the House ".

- "Pleasant to everyone, heavy to nobody, he cared only for others".

- "Model of balance, he knew how to dominate natural shots, deriving from contrasts".

- "Deferent to everyone, shy of every word about him, he was always the first to greet when you met him".

- Remember Bro. Massimo Besozzi:

"Once, Fr. Calabria sent Francis and me to do the Spiritual Exercises at the Carthusians of Vedana, (Belluno); at the end of the retreat he showed me his resolves and asked me to call him back to order whenever I saw that he was missing. I was stunned. I wondered when Bro. Francis had ever offered reason to make observations.

"It was not easy to get advice from Brother Francis, especially of an ascetic or spiritual topic. He used to say: It is not I who should give advice, I would rather need to receive it; or rather, I could give it if I had taken advantage of the graces of the Lord".

In reality, Brother Francis was a living "*advice*" by his example, even when he did not speak.

Brother Massimo Besozzi, who had been a fiery Catholic trade unionist, said one day to Brother Francis, in the presence of Fr. Calabria: *"El pol vestirse da poareto fin ch'el vol, ma se vede che soto ghè sempre el* conte" *(You can dress as poor as you wish, but the Earl appears within).*

These two confreres were in great confidence. And Francis tolerated the words of Brother Massimo with a patient smile.

TESTIMONIES OF SOME POOR SERVANT SISTERS.

All say unanimously that Brother Francis "was dignified, serious, polite, elegant, and reserved". And female curiosity, inquired about the Earl who had chosen their poor life.

«*When he introduced himself, always through the "wheel door" and rang bell to ask for hot water or something else for Fr. John Calabria",* Sister Luigia Rizzi testifies, "*I seemed to hear the voice of an angel: he had that sweetness, meekness, humility, patience that I can't describe, so angelic in everything. He never made any claims and didn't want any attention to be given to him. He did not lose patience when he had to wait. He never made it clear that he was in a hurry because he had so many other things to do*."

And another Sister continues: "*Everything in him spoke of humility and inner life".*

ALUMNI ENDORSEMENTS.

The young people, aged 12 to 18, who were in the Institute, were curious to see how the "rich Earl" behaved who had made himself "Poor Servant" to serve them.

"He dressed very modestly and his slender person, his way of walking, and his calm voice often resounds me."

Another former student of the house reveals that "*Brother Francis spoke more with his gaze and with his attitude than with his word*" ... He specifies*: "I was drawn to his gaze and I stopped to look at him in that attitude that seemed to me full of love. In those moments I seemed to communicate with him through silent dialogue, a spiritual condition that made me think a lot later, and which I have always thought about. This happened to me at every time I had the opportunity to meet him.*"

And another former pupil of that time remembers his first meeting with emotion: "*The first time I met him, he paternally cared for me. He asked me which parish I came from, what job I did, and what class I attended. From the first time, I realized that I was meeting a person of exquisite kindness, who immediately put me at ease. He always ended every meeting with some paternal exhortation".*

The diocesan priest, Msgr. Antonio Bagnara testifies: "*His appearance was of great simplicity. His ways very distinct. He spoke very little, but he was very attentive to the people he met at the door when he had the reception duty shift. He dressed very dimly and he did not distinguish himself from the other Brothers of the House*".

Another priest, who will then write a short biography of Brother Perez, Don Cirillo Boscagin, an ex officio witness in the process (for canonization), adds: *«I have seen and observed him since 1917-18. When I was a young seminarian, I went with my group of companions, to San Zeno in Monte to receive the blessing of Fr. Calabria, but also, as they said among us, "to see the Earl who became the receptionist". I remember that when he was in the reception, he hurried to report our request to Fr. John. Once I saw him cleaning the courtyards*

generated in us great admiration and emotion. He was very reserved and almost always assumed an attitude that made him think he was in constant contemplation, and was involved with his whole being, in something that does not belong to this world ".

One day, Earl Ottavio Pellegrini, who had been and remained a close friend of Francis, went to visit him in San Zeno in Monte. Entering the discussion about his decision to become a friar, with understandable wonder, he received this clear confession from his friend Perez: "*I am ready to go up and down Via Nuova with a broom under my arm, if Fr. Calabria would order me*".

CHAPTER TWENTY- SIX

NEVER ENDING VENERATION

ACQUAINTANCE AND DEVOTION TO FR. CALABRIA.

We have already repeated frequently, the veneration of Francis Perez towards Fr. John Calabria revealed in many delicate ways and gestures. A glimpse of this devotion is found in the few letters that Brother Francis wrote to Fr. John Calabria, on the occasion of anniversaries or holidays. He wrote on behalf of all the other

confreres, but his particular affection emerges in the fine filigree. Here are some examples.

On October 8, 1925, the day of Fr. John Calabria's birthday, he wrote:

"In these poor lines, please accept the expression of feelings of your dear children, of the deepest affection, gratitude, and their humble submission. How can we not be linked to you by the bonds of the most tender affections of children to our esteemed father, full of charity for all of us? ... On this day we express our gratitude for the good done to us in this holy house and to many souls, to whom from the most tender years you lavished zealous care, relieving many misery and consoling so many afflicted ... We submit ourselves totally to your wishes at the cost of any sacrifice... "

And on the anniversary of the priestly ordination of Fr. Calabria on August 15, 1927, he wrote:

"To you who with so much love take care of us to the point of suffering so much for us; to you who have administered and directed this Opera for the past 20 years, as an instrument of divine Providence; to you we are obliged in so many ways, to you on this day remember your 26th anniversary of the celebration of Holy Mass ... we wish all those blessings that the Lord knows how to give to his beloved ... Believe in affection, gratitude, devotion of your humble son, Francis ".

On the Patron's day of Fr. John Calabria, on June 24, 1929, the feast of St. John, he wrote:

"Today is a great celebration for the Church, remembering the holy Precursor of Jesus Christ, but it is also a great celebration for us in the Casa Buoni Fanciulli, which recalls the name of our beloved father. On this day we all feel indebted to you with deep gratitude for what you have done for us so much good and sacrificed your existence in favour of the souls. And I, especially, hear in my heart a voice that reminds me of so many benefits received from you, so much affection you have shown me, almost a maternal warmth in these twenty years of my abode in this House ... You have been my Custodian Angel: my good adviser and my support. How much charity you had for me! ... From today I want to read your lips and hang on your words, as a faithful interpreter of your desires, convinced that you are that guide Lord has given me to lead me to the port of wellbeing. Thank you, therefore, Fr. Calabria for everything. Grant me forgiveness for every failure ... Your affectionate son Francis".

And so too, in the various anniversaries so dear to Fr. Calabria: baptism, Holy Christmas, Clerical vestition day, etc.

"We all Brothers", he wrote on August 10, 1931 *" feel how sweet it is to live under his fatherly care in this holy House, where everything speaks of God, where we feel like children in the hands of Divine Providence, in this holy House which is the Ark of salvation for many souls, where peace and spirit of God reign... "*

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

JUBILATIONS AND AGONY AT THE APPROVAL

DIOCESAN APPROVAL OF: THE CONGREGATION PSDP

Brother Francis had chosen to serve God, following the footsteps of his dear friend and Father John Calabria. After leaving everything, riches, honours and wealth, he had joined him, making the vow of poverty, chastity, obedience and filial abandonment in the hands of Divine Providence: a true self-giving and consecration of oneself to God, in the service of the poorest brothers.

But this choice of consecrated life had not yet received the approval of the ecclesiastical Authority, even if the bishop of Verona, Msgr. Girolamo Cardinale, had a great esteem and veneration for Fr. Calabria and his institution.

The obstacles were the Constitutions. The charism of the Opera, which provided for complete legal equality between religious priests and religious brothers, was unable to match this with the rules of the Code of Canon Law.

Msgr. Girolamo Cardinale was available to approve the Institute immediately, but only as a *clerical congregation*. This involved a

prevalence of the clerical character over religious who were not priests.

Both on the part of the Bishop of Verona, as well as on the part of Fr. Luigi Pedrollo, there was all the goodwill to reach a compromise acceptable on both sides.

The work was long and exhausting. It required a lot of patience and mutual understanding. But the end result was a compromise between canon law and the charism of the Opera, with a prevalence of the clerical character.

Some articles, in particular, did not correspond to what Fr. Calabria had always thought and said. (*We still had to work on it to find an acceptable solution.)*

But some events triggered things and led to a somewhat a tarnished conclusion, which left everyone unhappy.

To follow the chronicle of these facts, we use written memo from Fr. Calabria:

"*I understood that the Brothers had a great mission to accomplish, a great apostolate, not only in the Opera, but also in the world outside. Over time they had to become vital canters, to which outside people had to refer, informed by the spirit of trust in God and abandonment to his Divine Providence. The same goes for priests: apostolic priests, to whom, over time, others had to adhere and live an orderly and priestly life. So, we went on, without having the approval of the Church. This was desired and, for this purpose, prayed,*

suffered and lived waiting for the opportune moment of divine Providence. And this was almost unexpected. From Rome, from the Holy See, we were asked that some priests of the Opera take over a parish of poor souls, almost completely abandoned. After prayers and advice, we concluded that three priests and two brothers would go, provided that the Opera was first approved by the Diocesan Ordinary. And here, then, in hurry and fury the holy Rules or rather the Constitutions, which for some time, by order of Msgr. Bishop, were reviewed by Msgr. Zenati for the bishop and by Fr. Pedrollo for the Opera ... ".

The Verona priest Fr. Giulio Bevilacqua, who held the position of Consultor of the Congregation of Religious and was in charge of the "Pontifical Opera for the Preservation of the Faith and Provision of the New Churches", had suggested to the Vicar of Rome, Cardinal Marchetti Selvaggiani, to call the religious of Fr. Calabria for pastoral care in the poor Roman suburbs.

Fr. Calabria, after extended reflection, replied that he agreed to send his confreres to Rome, but first he wanted the ecclesiastical authorities to approve his Institute. The urgent need to send the religious to Rome as soon as possible precipitated things. Unfortunately, haste is never a good adviser.

GOD'S WILL OR HUMAN OBSTINACY

In community life and in the direction practice of the Institute "Buoni Fanciulli", the relationship between religious priests and lay

religious had always been marked by an atmosphere of absolute equality in dealing: uniformity in food, rooms, living standards and in the availability to every type of service necessary for the community (in the House, until then, there had never been external helpers, not even for the humblest jobs). On this point, the thought of Fr. Calabria had always been linear. “Otherwise, asked, Fr. Calabria, how could these new religious testify that God is the Father of all and, therefore, we are all equal and brothers? And what kind of equal dignity could there have been if rules had been codified that put some in a higher position, destined to command, and the others, instead, destined only to obey?

On February 11, 1932, the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, the Bishop Msgr. Jerome Cardinale, under the pressure from Rome, read the text of the "*Decree of erection of the new Congregation*", even before the definitive drafting of the text of the Constitutions.

The small community, which lived around Fr. Calabria, exulted with joy, smiling faces, affectionate hugs, great animation. It was snowing outside. A soft white brushstroke hid and levelled any roughness under its white coat. Fr. Calabria, on the same evening, noted in his diary:

“*This is precisely the day the Lord has made. We rejoice and enjoy! Today, by the highest grace of God, the new Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence has been erected. The Lord has imprinted his divine seal. At 9 o'clock His Excellency, the Bishop read with great solemnity the Decree of erection. Deo Gratias, Deo Gratis, Deo Gratias.* Thanks be to God; Thanks be to God”.

On March 4, 1932, in the Study house of Nazareth, the bishop read the "*Decree of approval of the Constitutions*" and received the first three-year profession of 13 priests. By his authority, he appointed Fr. Calabria as the first Superior General of the new clerical Congregation and chose the members of the General Council.

On March 19, 1932, twenty religious brothers also made three-year profession in San Zeno in Monte.

The Congregation of the *"Poor Servants of Divine Providence"* was formed, made up of 33 professed religious.

FIRST CONTRASTS: DIFFERENCE OF INTERPRETATION.

As the text of the Constitution became known to the religious, some articles appeared, written by his own hand by the Bishop of Verona, which impacted the sensitivity of the Religious Brothers and were in open contrast with the thought and practice of Fr. Calabria.

In the eyes of the inexperienced, this question could have the presence of a shop bitch, a struggle to have places of pre-eminence and power. But it is misleading to judge in this way those people who had abandoned everything to serve the Lord: their career, designations, securities.

The spirit of the Congregation was always founded on the Gospel principle of fraternal collaboration between all the members, without distinction whatsoever. Among them there had always been a spontaneous competition between *"those who put themselves at the*

service of the brothers" or between *"those who gave themselves more"*. Fr. Calabria, rather than dwelling on the terms of *"clerical congregation"* or *"lay congregation"*, aimed at the substance of the Gospel message: "*Whoever wants to be first among you let him be the last, who wants to be greater, let him be the servant of all* "(Mt 20, 26-27). And again: "For *only one is your Father, and you are all brothers*" (Mt 23, 8). This was the substance that interested him.

Fr. Calabria wanted his thought to be clearly highlighted in these Constitutions:

"Our Congregation consists of priests and brothers, occupied in different tasks, but all united in the sweet bond of love and fraternal charity; they lead a perfectly common life, so as to form a single heart and a single soul, solely intended to love and serve God, in the exact fulfilment of their duties "(Art.3b).

And again:

"*Priests and Brothers, although they are two elements of different conditions, consider themselves in all respects as" brothers* ". *May they help each other in their duties, in their field, as one man, one religious, and one family* ". (Art.3.b.dir)

With these Constitutions, desired and approved by Msgr. Girolamo Cardinale, two classes of Religious emerged. The Religious Brothers were downgraded to B grade, and were no longer authorized to hold the position of local superior or to elect their representatives to the General Council. The disappointment of the lay brothers was great. They felt betrayed and deceived. This was not

the Congregation they had chosen and served for so many years and for which they had made their vows, on March 19, 1932.

Fr. Calabria locked in his deep pain: he suffered, prayed, and hoped. He tried to calm the hearts and invite them to unity, to prayer, and to trust. He promised that one day everything would be smoothed out.

In the diary of March 14, ten days after the diocesan approval, Fr. Calabria confided*: "I feel that the Opera is not exactly as Jesus wants it. In suffering and trial, the Lord will mould it".*

And, later, in finding that the will of God, confirmed by his spiritual father, was different from what was established by the bishop, he wrote:

"I didn't know what to say; for me the word of the spiritual Father is that of God; on the other hand, the approval of the Bishop is also the will of God; I feared and prayed. Of course, if I feel the greatness and mission of the apostolic priest, I also feel the greatness and mission of the religious Brother. "

The attitude of Fr. Calabria, in public and private, was aimed at maintaining unity and mutual charity. In order not to make the disappointment weigh more on the Brothers, he tried to use with them traits of trust, willingly listening to them for everything related to the progress of the workshops and the House. They were attitudes moved by charity which, if well understood, did not affect the norms of the Constitutions.

This way of acting was interpreted by some young priest as an evasion to apply the Constitutions. And they began to mumble, with an ironic smile: *"The Congregation is Clerical in law, but Lay in fact".*

Sorrowful and discouraged, Fr. Calabria retired in the house of Costozza, away from the centre of the division's outbreak.

Brother Francis, too, suffered from the situation that had arisen, but above all he suffered in knowing that his beloved father Fr. John was shattered in pain.

On July 28, 1934, he sent him a letter:

"Here, in San Zeno in Monte, I spend my days I don't even know how. I feel the emptiness of your absence and of the sad times, not always though, because prayer is comforting me; especially since I have no strength to do anything else and therefore spend the days on the terrace. I miss the ordinary jobs, both in lending myself to something small, and in keeping your company. "

Calabria after a short period spent in Pacengo, and some fleeting presence in Verona, returned to Costozza.

Brother Francis did not find peace in it. He wrote to him on October 23, 1934:

"I really can't adapt myself with your absence and the idea of the painful state in which I imagine you live, but also painful for all of us. I am left with no other comfort than the hope that God who governs all the designs of men will know with His wisdom to come to bring an end to this distressing state of concerns. I wish you very much for you,

dear Fr. Calabria, because we can see you come back among us and be the beacon of this great Opera and be of solace and guide to our steps… Poor Servant Bro. Francis".

Unfortunately, things did not smooth out. Some young priests, many of them in good faith and victims of inexperience and bold youthful radicalism, supported by their superior Fr. Augusto Cogo, remained firm in the belief that the spirit of the Congregation had been tainted.

And from Rome, in March 1935, arrived the Apostolic Visitor, Benedictine Abbot Dom Emanuele Caronti.

THE APOSTOLIC VISIT FOR THE CONGREGATION.

Abbot Caronti did not spare time to take up his mission. He began his mandate instantly. On Monday March 04, 1935 he gave a conference at San Zeno in Monte and at Nazareth. In the following days he quizzed some religious separately. All the accusations made against the Founder crumbled to dust. The challengers were unable to bring effective reasons. They looked for dodges, softened the allegations, and reduced everything to gossip.

On July 20, 1935, the Abbot Caronti, with a letter to Fr. Calabria, made known the measures he had decided to take.

He ordered the return of all non-clerical students to their own family. Suspended the ordinations of all clerics. He decided to transfer the dissidents from the House of Nazareth to the parish of

Madonna di Campagna. Everything had to have an immediate implementation.

The sufferings of Fr. Calabria did not cease, even though the apostolic visit was clarifying and putting order in the Opera. Of course, this was not his thought and his desire.

The situation burdened him, made him suffer. He would have liked to bury himself in a hermitage, far from Verona, and leave everything to others to govern the Congregation.

His spiritual director, the Carmelite Fr. Natale, was always near him to console:

Dear Fr. Calabria, 'confida in Deo et mane in loco tuo' (Sirach 11, 22). (Trust in God and remain in your own place). To remain in the place that Jesus placed you, we need the greatest confidence in Him. Full, complete and stable confidence in Jesus is the daughter of the deepest humility. May the great misery always be before your mind, but always accompanied by humility "

FRANCIS AT THE CRISIS PERIOD IN THE CONGREGATION.

During these painful events, what was the attitude of Bro. Francis?

Certainly, his sensitive soul vibrated in harmony with that of his beloved Fr. John Calabria. In the letters he sent to Costozza and Pacengo, Francis never mentioned the Apostolic Visit, even if it can

be understood in the veiled hints. He tried to cheer up Fr. Calabria, making himself the spokesman for the other confreres, who professed to be faithful to the spirit of the Opera and their "*dear father*", during this terrible "*tempes*t". We find no criticism or claim against those young students, who stood as defenders of the Congregation and allowed themselves to judge the Founder.

Brother Francis Perez, in the genuine words of Fr. Calabria, perceived all the suffering and bitterness that tormented his soul.

Not being able to comfort him in words, he wrote to him frequently:

"I often spend time in your room, where I seem to see you at the table always intent on writing, answering, and thinking. I find myself lost without you, but I enjoy that you can reach the end of this journey. May the Lord grant you the health and strength to extend this stay ... ".

Again, he wrote**:** *"Allow me to come near you for a moment with a line so as not to tire you too much. I would like to tell you many things, but I will just say that we strongly feel your absence, although it is in view of the absolute need it has for rest, relaxation, continuing to remain at Costozza. Certainly, the absence of a father and such a loving father leaves the children on trial, because we ever more feel the need for your closeness ... ".*

CHAPTER TWENTYEIGHT

HEROIC VIRTUES

HUMBLE AND OBEDIENT

We have many eyewitnesses as proofs who would say loudly the profound humility of Brother Francis. And few more strokes, which will highlight this virtue, will not do injustice to him.

Bro. Francis had culture, experience, and wisdom. He would not have lacked modesty if he had shown these qualities and abilities. Asked for some legal opinion, he answered exactly. But, to the praise of thanks and appreciation, he shielded himself, as if he had given an obvious and unimportant answer. He did not show off his humility in words, but with a sincere attitude, without forcing.

One day, to cheer the brothers during a festivity, Fr. Calabria ordered him to compose a poem. And Francis, who was not a poet, but knew the classics well, got down to it. A poem of three couplets came out. We report here the first stanza, certainly not Dante's, but exact, in verse and rhyme:

If ever had I verses for making stanzas
and now, already old, I still miss it,

flat obedience my pen leads
and give strength to my tired mind.

If I ever had… I still miss it,

even obedience my pen leads
and give strength to my tired mind.

At times Fr. Calabria asked him to make a small talk of circumstance. He did it well enough. And once, in particular, the closure was underlined by thunderous applause. He blushed in confusion. Then, he went to Fr. Calabria to humbly request him to tear up that sheet. He seemed, and was undeniably, thirsty for humiliation.

About obedience, he took everything to the letter. Fr. Calabria often said: *"Here you have to be headless, like rags, willing to do anything*."

An apparently cold-hearted disposition, a peak that only the great souls know how to reach. It seems to us that Francis knew how to climb it, with resolve and with the help of God's grace.

Fr. Calabria said of him one day: *"That man, when he dies, will take direct flight to Heaven. We must keep track of his life.* "

Someone could conclude that this man was a fanatic of obedience and humility. One could smile with the help of certain little things, and also add that holiness consists in many other things and not in these decorations. Certainly, if his disposition had been only external,

made of gestures and attitudes, without a sincere and convinced adherence of the spirit, it would have resulted in an unpleasant and mockery example of following Christ.

Moreover, obedience, so extraordinary in Francis, never went to the weakness of charity. It remained always the top most of all.

Let's take a small example, in itself insignificant, but suggestive of the measure of judgment of this religious. One Sunday Francis had stayed at home to assist some boys who were unable to go out for the usual walk.

Among them, there was one who had a leg amputated. He moved with the help of a crutch. For the rest, lively and fond of the game. As he tried to jump over a hole, he fell into it and broke the crutch in two. Francis saw the desolation of that boy; he did not scold him, but was concerned to see him again serene. "*I'll fix your crutch*," he said. But then, he remembered that he had the strict order not to leave the boys alone, and, moreover, it was a matter of observing Sunday rest. Back then the festive rest was sacred. But he won charity. He recommended the boys to be good and went to the carpentry. He put the crutch back in place and handed it back to the boy, who had remained motionless waiting for him.

"I will keep all my vows: but I will give special importance to obedience, ready, blind with all the superiors, like rags in their hands," he wrote thus in his spiritual resolve of 1918.

A religious, brother Edward Farina, received the obedience to change his placement. He wished to have a thought to remember

during his distance from Verona. Francis replied in the usual way, that it was not for him to give advice, but ... *"I believe that the best advice is what I have often heard from the Father: that in this House one must be headless, nor let oneself be guided by one's own judgment, and have great confidence and trust in one's superior, from whom we must depend on everything ".*

Another brother wrote*: "What was commanded by obedience was done by him with true spirit and supernatural conviction. He did not want any office but only obey, and therefore he avoided every privilege or thought, even though he could ask for it because of his delicate health ".*

CHAPTER TWENTYNINE

PURSUIT FOR HOLINESS

SPIRITUAL ACQUAINTANCES AMONG THE SAINTS.

Fr. John Calabria and Brother Francis were connected by a delicate and profound friendship. Total confidence did not exclude mutual veneration. Soul mates, not identical in character, but fused in virtue, passionate pursuers of Jesus Christ.

They supported each other even though each played their distinct role.

We have already mentioned what Fr. Calabria thought of Brother Francis. Likewise, of Francis' filial and fraternal relationship with his Fr. Calabria. But let's complement something more. Francis used to say to his associates: *"I found in Fr. John Calabria the true wealth, instead of the false one that I left".*

In a letter of 1918 that Brother Francis sent to a Brother who was in the armed force, speaking of Fr. Calabria, he presented him as the *"Heart of my heart, brother, and friend. I love him profoundly. "*

Yet, in Fr. Calabria he saw the superior, indeed, the Superior (he never wrote this word with a lowercase), the interpreter of the will of God, and the undeniable guide of his life.

When did anyone ever hear him discuss an order? When did he ever oppose topic to topic, the "but", the "though", in front of a permission, I don't say to a command, from the Superior? Was he then imitative? Was he devoid of his own will, a fragile personality who cannot think or do anything alone? No, and the facts prove it. It was just faith and love.

It was up to him, as a "writer", to write in the name of the brothers the best wishes to Fr. Calabria for his name day or birthday or for other festive occasions. He always found new expressions. But it is not the literary value that emerges, but the sincere ardour.

Let's take just one example:

"... How can I make this day joyful to my Father and Superior? What gift to give him? I am poor in everything. And yet, on this day I renew the protest of all the affection that a son can give to his beloved Father, accompanied by the promise of being docile in listening to him, more prompt to carry out his advice and wishes ... that you, dearly beloved Father, may find in this son a source of consolation and comfort ... I beg you to support me, admonish me without regard, so that I may become a true Brother. "

It was a celebration for him to be able to give his Father added happiness.

Sometimes it could cost an obedience, especially when it contrasted with his desire to disappear. And yet, the answer was always the one dictated by love: *"As you wish, Father, as you believe; for me, when you are satisfied, that's enough".*

Every evening, despite having worked all day, he never failed to make a visit to dear Fr. Calabria, to take an interest in his health, to assure him of his remembrance, to wish him good night and perhaps to volunteer to awake with him during the very frequent painful nights of the Father.

Fr. Calabria gave him the task of maintaining epistolary relations with the religious called to arms during the War and even after. From these letters shines his enthusiasm, his joy in magnifying Providence for how much he worked, the minute detains in informing the young confreres of all the brothers of the House, without exceeding in too many exhortations.

He distributed warmth, and friendship, which were life and support to the perseverance of those "distant" brothers. Fr. Calabria added a few words to those letters and said that Francis expressed better than he did what he wanted to say.

When Fr. Calabria appointed him Novice Master, he could not refrain from making recommendations and reminders and instruction. But it was of few words. On the other hand, the conviction in what he said and the splendour of his life formed those young lives with greater strength.

And in 1934, when Fr. Calabria matured the long-awaited project to send some religious missionaries to India and wanted to have the written opinion of all, Francis, now old and sick, close to leaving this life, so he wrote:

"When asked to express my thoughts on the missions, what can I say to you, I, so ignorant, so poor in feelings? In any case, I will explain my thoughts: I am enthusiastically feeling the realization of the project, which has been maturing for years, to carry out a mission of Brothers and Priests who left for India in order to change those poor and abandoned brothers.

"I would also like to be part of this heroic host, but, having no strength, I cannot fail to envy their fortune. Admire yes, but do not send, because here too, in this great Opera, the designs of the Divine Providence are great ... I, for my part, put myself in your hands, because I want to be with you, Father, guided in any office and

condition, however low it may be, ready and willing to accept it, nothing more than wanting to do your will, to follow your example ".

CHAPTER THIRTY

FRANCIS AN OPEN BOOK

THE DEPTH OF FRANCIS KNOW TO FR JOHN CALABRIA

Brother Francis was an open book for Fr. Calabria. He wanted to be known to him to the end, not only the facts of his daily life, but also his thoughts, even those that least honoured him. To do this, he used a medium that was practiced at the time in the relationship between spiritual sons and spiritual fathers: the monthly written reports. Of Francis we have some of these "spiritual records", partly dated and others undated.

We present one, chosen at random, without date:

"Here I am to give you my brief account of the past month of November. I was at times distracted in my pious practices and in meditation, not reflecting, or a little, on what I read or had meditated,

hence is the reason for the little fruit I found. A somewhat languid faith preceding the various occupations and prayers. Poor spirit of mortification of my senses and my will, especially of my self-love. Poor contemplation and union with God during the day. Tendency to think incorrect of the next ... ".

The accounts end with the linked resolutions.

Sometimes the reports are a list of resolves. He was a man who grounded himself, and was anxious to get to the heart of God, and was abandoning himself in Him. And he placed his confidence to his Fr. Calabria, with the security of not making a mistake.

This ever-vigilant attention and this determined will to restart always every day, kept him in an atmosphere of fascinating freshness and out of any scruple or from the common danger of soothing down.

In his reports or intentions, the difficulty of controlling self-love often comes up again. He accuses himself of internal dislikes and disturbances for some humiliation. Yet everyone saw him as quiet, and infallible seeker of the last place, always sweet and affable.

But he knew that the "old man" never perishes completely. And not because he was an Earl. He knew very well that this is a common situation. Only fools are presumptuous and know nothing and waste their lives always finding real or false reasons to justify themselves. The road tread by the saints is different.

We would like to quote many fine maxims from his writings. Francis did not write very much. However, he knew how to hold the pen in his hand and we have many precious treasures left of him.

He did not keep a spiritual journal of his own. Perhaps he did not count this means as useful. Writing diaries? And for whom? Certainly not for posterity. This contrasted very much with his deep desire to be forgotten alive and dead. To reread him? Not even. Except for a comparison with the purposes of the last spiritual exercise he made, he lived always the present moment. And in that he saw the will of God. The resolution verbalized has a guiding line, but it did not affect too much the availability, and the on-duty attitude that God asked him (and he also saw God in men). He was like the servant who has no detailed plans. Rather, he fixes his attentive gaze "at the hands of his master" as a Psalm says, both to welcome His nods and to implore His help.

In the world Francis wrote many official letters, moral administrative reports, and other confidential letters.

In those pages you can admire the righteousness, the precision, and the essential conscience. He makes no preaching, but one can directly perceive what was the light that guided him and the goal to which he tended.

As a religious, Francis wrote letters to distant confreres, and to alumni. To the Father he wrote spiritual accounts and resolves. There are letters of due courtesy to old acquaintances and others of affectionate tenderness to his loved ones, especially to his nephews and nieces. In the letter, we note his constant trepidation that moved him because those of his blood would be worthy followers of Christ, and fervent in works and prayer.

As St. Paul would say; "In omnibus Christus" *in everything seek Christ*, (Col 3:11). The Gospel and the Imitation of Christ did nothing but nourish his fervour.

CHAPTER THIRTYONE
FRANCIS' FINAL 'YES'

THE LAST SPLENDOUR

Francis, from an early age, was threatened by several episodes of infirmity, in which the lungs were almost always intricate. Even his mother Anna had always been worried about the "delicate lungs" of her Cecchino (*the family name of Francis*).

That physical weakness also accompanied him during his stay in the Institute and, over the years, it became increasingly acute and made him suffer a lot. Fr. Luigi Pedrollo, told us that "his frail health did not allow him to make strains of any kind ... His health was undermined by a lung tuberculous infection, a type that is not dangerous to others.

"He frequently passed bounces in bed, or retired to his room or sitting in a deck chair. But he moved from time to time. I remember going to church in certain hours of the afternoon. In absolute silence, I felt someone coughing with some insistence. The coughing revealed the presence of Brother Francis. And I felt a tightening in my heart to hear him cough "

The nuns in the kitchen especially noticed his ill health: "Since I entered the Institute of Fr. Calabria", Sister Oliva Mascalzoni recalls*, "and precisely since April 1930, I have seen Brother Perez always frail with health, sickly, and weak. Over the years he became more and more lean, and thin. In 1935, he got worse and worse, and in the last year of his life, that is in 1937, he became ill enough to be almost always in the room. It was also seen externally that he was a type who suffered, although no one heard him complain. He had a lung disease, some kind of tuberculosis. None of the superiors had told me of it explicitly, but he was certainly ill by lungs. I also deduce from the fact that in the last years of his life, he almost always ate in his room, and everything he used we had to disinfect.... I remember that a Brother used to come to take his tray of food, with what we prepared for Brother Francis Perez. And when the tray was brought back, we had already prepared near the kitchen door, under the table, a bowl with disinfectant. Everything was put in there and we boiled everything: plates, glasses, and cutlery. Only later they were washed again in the common sink. And Brother Francis' dishes were always the same and kept aside".*

And the Sisters concluded: "*We realized that he was sick and he suffered a lot because of the persistent and annoying cough, but no one ever heard him complain, despite suffering from the cold and the lack of healthy food".*

In particular, the years of the First World War, 1915-18, were terrible, due to material constraints and scarcity of wood to heat up even the terrible winter of 1929, which was distinguished by an intense cold. *"He was content with a bottle of hot water to warm up and nothing more, since there were no heating systems or stoves. And*

when Fr. Calabria advised him to put a heater in his room, he insisted on having no privileges ".

Even the students noticed the suffering of Brother Francis from the paleness and obvious features of his face. "*He coughed often and was always very pale, "*recalls one of the students*", but I have never heard him complain about the cold, nor the inconvenience or fragile health. I saw him, at all times, serene and happy, despite the inconveniences that the shortages of time and community life entailed".*

"*At that time, in San Zeno in Monte they lived in great poverty and austerity. Francis shared these limitations and, unlike many of us, he also did it with joy and it is hard to suffer with joy*".

We are not thinking of a masochist who enjoys macerating himself, but a follower of Christ, happy to be made worthy of joining his sufferings with those of Christ for the redemption of the world.

In his last years he also suffered from heart disease besides the chest pain. The onset of heart disease suddenly appeared, enough to fear death at any moment. Once the danger was over, the common life resumed as if nothing had happened. And some Brothers, seeing him enter the refectory, commented with a benevolent smile: "*Yesterday he seemed dead, today he comes to the table!".*

And Francis replied with a slight and imperceptible smile.

The last six years of life were a continuous ordeal for Francis. No serious illnesses, but the worsening of old diseases, especially

pulmonary, aggravated by heart failure. He knew himself. He never asked the doctor. He endured, and kept silent even minimized, when Fr. Calabria and his brothers read his suffering in the colour of his face. Sometimes he didn't have the physical strength to get up. But whoever went to see him felt beautifully sent away: I don't need anything, now I get up.

And he got up. He also spent days and weeks in bed and had to accept some services. It was evident that he did it with difficulty, but "in obedience" always lived happily. All that he could do alone, he managed, and sometimes, after a sleepless and troubled night, he could be seen punctually at prayer and some small work.

On July 9, 1931, he turned seventy. Fr. Calabria wanted this date to be celebrated solemnly, with his utmost confusion.

The confreres of the Opera, also from other houses, his friends and the boys huddled around him with wishes and poems. Fr. Calabria managed to have a Papal telegram and a nice congratulatory letter from the Bishop. The periodical of the House, “L'Amico dei Buoni Fanciulli”, “*The Friend, of the Good Children*", gave the following report, with the prior approval of Fr. Calabria:

“*Brother Francis Perez, a former Earl, happily turned seventy years old, on Thursday July 09. In domestic peace the happy anniversary did not go unnoticed; prayers and congratulations came from everywhere*. "

Francis was not disturbed by that little noise. He knew it was an act of affection from his Fr. John Calabria, but his head did not go up;

he found no reason to be proud. Since then he ran fast to the goal. Heaven seemed close to him, especially when, with great displeasure, he was forced to give up the annual spiritual exercises forever with his confreres. But he had to wait a long time before meeting his Lord. Two years before his death he had an aggravation. The worst was feared, but the hour had not come.

He had to stay in bed for a long time and accept that a Brother would take care of him. This faithful Samaritan was able to observe the virtue of that saint who marched with abrupt commitment to the Lord. Sometimes Francis sent him away saying: *"Go and do something. Go and see if the Father needs you. I feel good*".

"*He knew how to conceal his illness and endure it without complaints. Sometimes he said: that's what we're made of, mud. I have always noticed in him a perfect detachment from everything, he had no needs whatsoever, even in what was essential. I don't remember ever hearing him speak ill of anyone, and if he felt charity missed by others, he ran to the defences. "I learned a lot next to him,"* said his nurse later.

The last six months were very hard: difficulty in breathing, excruciating cough, and heart thumping. But nothing that worried him put out his smile.

On November 27, 1937, just before noon, he felt very bad. Asked the Anointing of the Sick.

Thus wrote Fr. Calabria: *"... he received the sacrament with edifying piety and full conformity to the will of God, as a true homo Dei man of God, and religious saint*".

On December 03, at 09 PM, the nurse brother came to give him a soothing injection. Francis gently asked to be left alone, because everything was now superfluous. But he was not listened to and he accepted, as always, the will of others. While practicing the injection, the nurse realized that it was at the end. He asked Francis if he wanted to see Fr. Calabria, "*No, replied the dying person at this hour. "We must not disturb him".*

Having regained a little tranquil, he pronounced: "*In manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum*", (in your hands, Lord, I entrust my spirit) Jesus' words on the cross.

From 10.00 PM to midnight, he was shaken by a convulsion and painful cough. He had become breathless. The lips murmured prayers without any sound.

The clock struck midnight. Francis, in a clear voice, recited the entire *Angelus* alone. Then the triple ejaculatory prayer: Jesus, Mary, Joseph, my soul breathes in peace with you.

He was silent for about half an hour. Then, again the Marian hymn: "*Ave, maris stella*!". He prayed distinctly for Fr. Calabria, for the Brothers, and for the Opera.

Shortly afterwards he began to pray again: for the Bishop, and for Verona.

At 02.45 early morning of December 4, 1937. Once again, the nurse brother asked him: "Do you want me to call Fr. Calabria?" No, replied Francis, *"no need, Fr. John Calabria is here" (*in fact Fr. John Calabria was bedridden with fever, in the Nazareth formation house next hillside of the city wall of Verona*).*

But Francis saw him standing nearby. He bowed his head and made the sign of the cross, receiving the blessing. Then he listened…., And then replied: *"As you wish, Father, as you wish".*

A YES OF HIS WHOLE LIFE.

Nature tempted its part. Between one prayer and the next, his repeated voices were heard: *"I can't take it anymore".*

Fr. Luigi Adami, his old friend, was present. They knew each other when the later was as a boy in the church of St. Benedetto al Monte (*in Verona city*). Both of them had faithfully followed their master. Fr. Adami, prayed, and suggested some comments. Francis consciously followed. He thanked him verbally.

The Brother nurse humbly asked him for forgiveness if something had disgusted him or had been missing. Francis could not allow this. With enormous effort he replied:

"There is nothing to forgive, I am poor and miserable".

And the Brother, after a pause: *"Pray for me."*

And Francis concluded the dialogue: *“I await you up there; but now continue your work as you did always, in simplicity”.*

Perhaps Heaven opened up to him while he was still here. He whispered, but nothing was understood. Then suddenly: *“I am not worthy of these roses; they are not for me. "*

What did he see?

A few moments before he passed away, the word that summed up his whole life was still distinctly heard: *"Ready, ready".*

It was the answer to God's call.

The first Saturday of the month began. The clock showed 04.30 AM. The calendar indicated December 04, 1937.

Seventeen years later, December 4, 1954, even his beloved friend Father John Calabria, on the same date and on the last Saturday of the Marian holy year, would have reached him in the sky.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO
FIRST REACTION OF FR JOHN CALABRIA

A SAINT DIED

In his Diary, of November 23, 1937, Fr. Calabria wrote this note:

“Our dear Brother Francis Perez at this time, 11 AM, has received with edifying piety and full uniformity to the divine will, the Holy Oil. A true man of God (*homo Dei*). A Saint Religious ".

And the day after the death of Brother Francis, Fr. Calabria sent a circular letter to the religious:

"*Dear confreres, and brothers,*
Our dearest Brother Francis Perez Passed away.

This morning, in the aftermath of the first Friday of the month and the feast of St. Francis Xavier, and in the early hours of the first Saturday of the month, which is dedicated in a special way to the Madonna, of whom he was most devoted, at 4.30 AM, the beautiful soul of Brother Francis Perez has made a straight flight to heaven; we have many reasons to believe that he received the reward without delay. He has always edified us. And the perfume of his virtues will remain for a long time embalmed in our House. It is a unanimous voice: a saint has died! More than receiving this news people said: we do not know whether to make condolences or rejoices more. It is certain that dear Brother Francis was a pillar for the House: a very high yielding income, divine blessings. This is our consolation, when he was alive with us, he was a magnet of graces, reaching up there. He will be dense shower of divine blessings.

Uplifting the last moments. Shortly before midnight, he asked what time it was. At midnight he recited Angelus Domini clearly. Later he recited the hymn Ave Maris Stella in full fervour. The Brother who assisted him, seeing him getting worse, asked him if he wished the Priest to be called to him. "But look, Fr. John Calabria is here!" he said.

And turned to one side, as he actually conferred with Fr. John Calabria, he thanked him for what he had been for him. "Come with me, remember! And assist me to the end," he said. And he made the Sign of the Cross as every time he received the blessing of the Father.

He felt more oppressed around three in the morning. "Enough, I can't take it anymore!", He repeated several times. Then he settled down. He recited the whole ejaculation prayer, "Jesus, Joseph, Mary". Then he added, "I feel the Lord is calling me." And he began to pray for Fr. Calabria, for world peace, for the Bishop, for his loved ones, for his brothers, for the Houses, and for everyone. Next to each one's name he added an intention not well distinct to record.

At a certain moment, looking up, "Ah! They are not for me, he said, they are not for me those roses! I am nothing but a poor wretch!".

Just before he breathed his last, he said sternly: "memento homo quia pulvis es et in pulverem reverteris" (Remember man you are dust and into dust you will return).

And he added: "in manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum!" (unto your hand Lord, I entrust my spirit).

He entered in a very short agony. And almost without giving a sign, he fell asleep in the Lord. The Priest present there, seeing him motionless, realized that he had expired and recited the first prayers of the dead.

O dear brothers, what an enviable death! But we must say that it was the echo of his life! May he obtain from the Lord through the intercession of Mary, that we live like him to deserve to die like him.

Fr. John Calabria poor among the poor servants ».

On the evening of December 05, 1937, Fr. Calabria wrote in his Diary:

«*The night from Friday to Saturday 04 December 1937, around 04.30 AM. God offered the soul of our dear and beloved brother Francis Perez, a man of God, who always loved the Lord and served him in his journey on earth. He was one of the first to be part of the great Opera of the Good Children, now the Congregation of the Poor Servants on earth and now in heaven. Fr. John Calabria was in Nazareth, because he was indisposed and in the last moments, he had the feeling of having Fr. Calabria near him in assistance and he thanked him and made the sign of the cross. Before dying he prayed for everyone: for the House, for sinners, and for the whole world.*

His last words were: "I don't deserve those beautiful roses. Remember man…. Memento homo ..." and then he entered in agony. I have always judged him, esteemed him as a true saint, servant of God and I hope that, one day the Lord will also glorify him on earth.

Francis Perez, Perez, Perez, pray for me.

Fr. John Calabria ".

For Fr. Calabria there was no doubt. Although the Church forbade public veneration, Calabria placed Brother Francis among his patron

saints on his own. He prayed to him, invoked him, and prayed him novenas.

In October 1940, Fr. Calabria was in Roncà. A group of young novices huddled around him. He often remembered some facts from the life of Brother Francis Perez.

One day, Fr. Calabria said: "*Today I handed over to Brother Francis Perez the key to Heaven, so that he may be the receptionist and gatekeeper of our ward in heaven. He, who was always obedient on earth, will also be up there.*

He would have liked to become a beggar, to go from door to door, to help many poor people; but he said it was too great a gift and he was not worthy to beg for Jesus Christ."

When asked if he wished to die early, Brother Francis replied:

"No, no, let's leave it to Providence."

But I, jokingly, I insisted: "*But tell me the time and day you wish to die and I will tell the Lord*".

And he, again: *"No, let Divine Providence do it*."

Calabria concluded the story: *"I am sure that the Lord will exalt him, because he has made himself humble. He got used to everything, to sleep on the floor in case of necessity, to clean the toilets, to empty the cesspools, to stay in the dormitory and to feel the wind blowing on him from the cracks of the doors. Always settled, even when people*

came to visit him. He taught, corrected, watched over everyone and everything, always with humility. Nobody knew he was a lawyer. One day, at the end of the spiritual exercises, he handed me over a picture that framed his degree, which I had had him put in his room. "Take Fr. Calabria, I still possess this. I'm not attached to these things, but you better keep it."

"He was also a novice master. He was in charge of explaining the rules to the new Brothers."

Sometimes, jokingly light-hearted about him, I sang to him: "Saint Francis Perez, pray for us". He shielded himself: "But no, but no!" And I: 'Francis, do you have pride thoughts when I sing this to you?' 'No, father'; but I'm afraid of having them".

Once I ordered him to be photographed with a crucifix in his hand, and to write a spiritual thought in the back". And he, with great effort, obeyed.

Always obedient, attentive, and considerate. I wanted his bedroom to be kept as it was in his day. One day it will become a chapel".

On January 1, 1943, Fr. Calabria was at table with the novices in Roncà. He looked up and saw a picture depicting Brother Francis Perez.

"I assure you he was a saint!" He said pointing to the picture.

And he began to tell some facts about the life of this brother and his holy death.

"He was truly detached from all earthly goods. In privations and extreme poverty, he felt so happy to exclaim: "How can I have Heaven up there if I enjoy so much on earth?"

In 1947, Fr. Giovanni Bellarini and Bro. Bruno Zanolli were in the parish of Villa san Sebastiano, in Abruzzo.

Fr. Calabria wrote to the brother, who had introduced him to the difficult situation of the population divided between Catholics and Protestants.

"You tell me about the population of Villa San Sebastiano. It seems to me that the guardian angels of those inhabitants say to you: "Brother, make yourself a saint, love and serve the Lord with all the generosity possible. We will pray to the Lord that the fruit of so much good will give it to us, for the benefit of the souls entrusted to us. Make yourself a saint and we will assist you and accompany you to the Judge to get the prize from him. Help us as much as you can ".

If we could see and speak with the dearest Brother Francis Perez, he would say to us: "How happy I was to abandon the earth, and to possess my God, forever, because of my generosity. Make yourself a saint, pray for me always, in these days in a particular way.

God bless you, yours in Sacred Heart of Jesus,
Fr. John Calabria "

On the occasion of the greetings to the confreres for the holy Christmas of 1947, Fr. Calabria recommended the observance of the vows, indicating as a model Brother Francis:

"We avoid all refinement, certain comforts, and superfluity. What is necessary yes, it is fine; but it is easy to exaggerate a little at a time, and make a trousseau that is ill-suited to a poor servant. Always depend on who has the moral responsibility of the house; and you won't go wrong. That the vow of poverty does not run the risk of becoming a mockery: let us observe it happily, generously. If we are missing something, we are happy because we are poor. We remember our dear Brother Francis Perez: he depended literally in all things, even the smallest ones ".

Calabria had great confidence in the intercession of Brother Francis. He invited novenas for health, healing or special graces.

On April 17, 1949, in response to Father Giovanni Cardenal S.J., who told him that he had received a grace through the intercession of Brother Francis, he wrote:

"I agree with you through the bond of fraternal charity, which is becoming ever closer. From the day that the Providence brought us together, albeit by letter, I never forget you. My gaze often turns beyond the circle of the mountains, and is seeking, in Switzerland, that you pray and bring patience in the name of the Lord, for the good of souls, and for me poor creature.

Let us always stay united in charitate Christi (love of Christ), with the sole aim of hastening the coming of the holy kingdom of God, the triumph of the Church.

I am very pleased to hear that dear Bro. Francis Perez has given you honour; I really hope that the Lord wants to elevate him, while in his life he has served him so holy. His memory is always alive among us. I hope and fervently invoke that the significant improvement you have enjoyed goes from good to better, until complete recovery: to the glory of God, to the good of souls, to the praise of the good and faithful servant. I am waiting for better news, hurrying with desire the big word: I am healed! In the Sacred Heart, Fr. J. Calabria. ".

Fr. Calabria, generally speaking of brother Francis when he was still alive, confidently affirmed: *"That he is an authentic saint*".

Sometimes, and this cost a lot to poor Francis, he would introduce him to a friendly visitor or to some young religious, saying:

"Go, go and kiss the hands of Brother Francis, because he is a saint".

In his "raw" kindness and esteem, from time to time, it was sure that Brother Francis would not have sinned of vanity, Fr. Calabria came to tell him: *"You, Francis, are a great saint, a saint of miracles".*

The other, immediately answered:

"No, Fr. Calabria, no, I'm full of flaws".

And Fr. John, more insistent than ever:

"What, if I tell you something and you tell me that it isn't true?

Then you don't believe me. Then I would be a liar."

It was the abyss of confusion. Francis, closing his eyes and judgment, humbly concluded*: "Well, well, if you say so, Fr. Calabria, that's fine with me".*

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE
A SAINTLY PROTECTION

RECOGNITION OF SACNTITY

In the aftermath of the holy death of Francis, Advocate Ferruccio Giuli, wrote to his friend Fr. Calabria.

"As you wished, dear Fr. John Calabria, Fr. Luigi Pedrollo handed me the Rosary that the dear Brother Francis used daily. The gift is precious to me and I want to express you my gratitude for this new trait of affection.

"*Dear and holy Brother Francis! I'll never forget him. He is always present, alive, with his head inclined to goodness, always irradiated*

with a good smile; I still hear the words, - all humble, simple; his lived faith with which he welcomed me fraternally; his words of life that flowered up from his holy and beautiful soul, with which he often thanked me for the affection I showed to his beloved and venerable Father, Don Calabria! In order to admire and learn the total dedication to his home, I will always remember the humility and the life of hiddenness with which he wanted to conceal from everyone the spirit of absolutely Franciscan poverty, his heroic virtue of sacrifice, meticulous and alert study which he wanted to rise to ever more perfect virtue and holiness ...”

"Dear Fr. Calabria, my spirit, which you keep inextricably linked with so much fraternal charity to yours, fully understands the deep pain that the earthly detachment from Brother Francis caused you. But since the talk of our loved ones in the shrine of family intimacy revives our spirit, clears our mind, lifts our mind towards the serene skies of hope, so I wanted to express these feelings to you”.

"Also, to tell you that I think with joy, as perhaps you too contemplate, that the grave tears of this day may become an altar tomorrow".

Fr. Calabria continued to publicly remember Brother Francis as a saint. In addition to the expressions already quoted here and there, we can say that he had become familiar with the exhortation to some of his religious in difficulty because of illness or something else, to make a novena to Brother Francis Perez. He himself made these novenas for his or the Opera's needs.

He also had made the religious Fr. Albano Bussinello to write a fact-based booklet on Brother Francis Perez, which he then distributed widely, and always recommending everyone to turn to this saintly religious in prayer.

The funeral of Francis himself, who made himself bare and naked beyond words, was followed not only by the members of the Opera, but by many, we would say, his devotees: those people who had discovered him even in his total self-effacement.

The body was placed in the tomb that the Congregation inherited at the entrance of the monumental cemetery of Verona.

His fame grew, even outside the house, after his death.

Cardinal Piazza, who had known him, said: *"I have known in him an authentic character of a saint of our day, and a true Poor Servant of Divine Providence".*

The famous Dominican Fr. Enrico Genovesi has well-defined Brother Francis.

"Brother Francis is one of the perpetual followers of the Gospel, who spread light, perfume, and goodness of the Gospel".

We have already reported the witness of Fr. Goffredo Friedmann, Priest of Stigmatine Congregation. He had come to Catholicism from Lutheran church as a young man through the work and example of the young John Calabria. He writes thus:

"For me Brother Francis Perez is a saint at the altar; I have never doubted it, I do not doubt it today; on the contrary, I am quite certain ... I may not be lucky enough to see him raised to the altars, but the day of his elevation will come".

Even in his relatives, after the initial dismay and disapproval of his choice to leave everything, to consecrate himself to the Lord in the House of Good Children with Fr. John Calabria, grew their esteem and then veneration of him made its broad way.

We report here, almost entirely, a written testimony of Ada Fochessati, wife of the great writer Riccardo Bacchelli. Ada was the daughter of Elena Perez, Francis' older sister. Ada's writing bears the date of August 18, 1967.

"Various, if not many, were the occasions to meet my uncle Francis from 1900 onwards, until his death.

"The Perez were then very wealthy; they were among the first families and highly esteemed both in their private and public life.

"His family was very religious, not bigoted, but truly convinced of their duties towards God, was an exemplary family, as was my grandmother, Marchesa Da Lisca."

"Francis had a disciplined nature, a little absorbed, mystical, or meditative and very affectionate with brothers and relatives. For this reason, I believe, that when Francis withdrew himself with Fr. Calabria, Sister Lavinia did not know how to give herself peace. She felt a blending breaking that had something special."

"In political struggles Francis behaved with virile courage and openly attested to the faith, without ranting against his opponents, and he had more than one."

"Francis gradually interlaced himself with Fr. Calabria through the charity exercised with the sick, the poor, and to the point of giving all his possessions to develop the Opera of Fr. Calabria which had started in San Benedetto al Monte, with the account of a couple of poor children, Opera which rapidly grew and moved to San Zeno in Monte.

"Francis learned from Fr. Calabria how to read and meditate on the Gospel in the most real sense of the Word and was converted fully to it. Joining the Casa Buoni Fanciulli, he asked to be destined for the humblest services, to work as a janitor, and not to be known by anyone. Fr. Calabria accepted him after a stringent examination done with Fr. Natale and with Fr. Zamparo.

The reactions in the family? Very strong objections were those of his sisters Lavinia and Maria. The first did not give herself peace and after having tried every way with the various relatives, she wanted to resort to the same Fr. Calabria, to make Francis retrace his steps.

Then she herself was convinced of the call asked Fr. Calabria to be welcomed in his Institute, where she lived the same life of poverty and humility as her dear brother Francis."

"The spirituality of Francis", continues Ada Bacchelli, *"according to me, was based on a serious internal formation, they had in the early age in the family and then in the parish, where the priests were true*

teachers, first in San Fermo parish, and later on to the Holy Apostles with Fr. Caprara and Fr. Giacomelli.

This spirituality was mainly based on humility and charity, virtues well rooted in the family and professed by his grandfather and father. His donation was a heroic act for the value of the capital he stripped off, but most of all for the acceptance of a poor and humble life, voluntarily chosen to follow the Lord. He was a true ascetic and thus lived for the rest of his long life.

"In the House of Good Children, he never held managerial positions, even though Fr. Calabria needed someone who knew how to handle the boring bureaucratic practices, and in this Brother Francis was a master even though he did not want to be called that way. And Fr. Calabria adhered to this desire to never have anything to be highlighted: he wanted to be used only to exert charity in humility and hiddenness. Even when Fr. Calabria gave him the task of following the novices who wanted to bind themselves to him, Francis always did so with gentleness, even without ever been erected him by appointment, as a doctor or a master. It was his life that he set as an example. If in the world he was very faithful to the Christian practices of piety, I imagine that he was equally exemplary in the Institute, I have no doubt. Already in the world he was dedicating a lot to his inner life so his application in the good Children Home was no difficulty."

"In his illness he behaved with great acceptance, we relatives had constant news of him and were increasingly edified by his actions, a sure sign of an increase of his life in union with God".

We could name other qualified testimonies. But the essay we gave is enough, especially since the most credible and sincere testimony was that of his friend and Father, Fr. Calabria.

Now Fr. Calabria has been declared a saint and as such venerated by the universal Church. Not for this, of course, it is up to Him to beatify Francis.

A LIVING SAINT'S: VENERATION OF BRO. FRANCIS PEREZ

It goes never unnoticed that St. John Calabria had always carried with him a precious relic of Francis Perez in his personal purse.

But surely, those who are dealing with the Cause of Francis cannot fail to take the utmost account of the explicit declarations of Fr. Calabria.

We should add detailed reports of thankfulness to him attributed by various people. But we don't want to go further.

His fame is not a resounding one. Yet, the images with his photo and the prayer of intercession are constantly requested by people.

Thirty years after his death, his few bones were exhumed and moved to a tomb built next to that of the holy Founder in the church of San Zeno in Monte.

Especially after the canonization of Fr. Calabria, we notice groups or single persons after visiting the tomb of Fr. Calabria in the side chapel proceed unavoidably visit to that of Brother Francis Perez.

Brother Francis is making his way among the humble and unassumingly, on tiptoe, as when he lived on earth.

We wind up these lines by inviting the reading and practice of the Gospel. If a single sentence of it succeeded in making Earl Perez a tested saint, surely the same Gospel, if we welcome it with simplicity and sincerity, will make us saints too, in whatever condition we find ourselves. And becoming saints is the only thing that matters.

CHRONOLOGY OF FRANCIS PEREZ.

1861 – July 9: Francis was born in the Perez Palace, in Via Leoncino, no. 11, in Verona, of Antonio Maria Nicolò Earl Perez and Anna marquise Da Lisca.

1861 – 11 July: Francis was baptized in the parish of St. Fermo Maggiore by Fr. Angelo Gottardi. They named him Francis Maria.

1869 – 12 April: He was affected by lung infection with violent fever, so as to reduce him to the end of his life. He is healed, but he will carry the consequences for a long time.

1869 – 18 October: He was enrolled in the Royal "Carlo Alberto" college of Moncalieri (TO), directed by Barnabite fathers. He was eight years old. He attended the last three years of elementary school and the first and second of gymnasium.

1871 - 29 June: He receives Confirmation from Msgr. Balma, bishop of Tolemaide, in the chapel of the Royal College "Carlo Alberto". On this occasion, the name ‘Carlo’ was added to him.

July: He was shifted from the college Moncalieri…

1874 - November: At thirteen, he entered the Rosminian Institute of Domodossola where he attended the third and fourth gymnasium.

1876: At the end of the fourth gymnasium, Francis returned to the family. He is enrolled in the fifth gymnasium of the seminary of Verona.

1878: After completing the V gymnasium (lower high school), he happily passed and thus proceeded the higher secondary school.

1878 - November: The first class of higher Secondary school began at the "Scipione Maffei" Royal High School in Verona.

1881: He obtained his classical high school diploma and thereafter enrolled in the Law Faculty of the University of Padua

1881/1885: He happily passed his law studies. On July 19, he discussed his thesis on "Royal prerogative in the change of Ministry". He was awarded a degree and proclaimed a doctor of law.

1888 January 19: He was appointed Deputy Magistrate of Verona. He withdrew on February 27, 1890

1890 January 04: Earl Antonio Perez, Francis' father dies. His brothers appointed him administrator of the assets of the Perez family. He left the house in Via Leoncino and went to live in the Pompei - Perez building, in Via Cavour no. 42, with the sisters.

1892 - 25 June: He was elected as Municipal councillor of Zevio. He resigned from that office on November 4, 1910.

1892: The Discalced Carmelite father Natale of Jesus arrived in Verona and became the spiritual father of Francis. The contact between John Calabria and Francis Perez began and sprouted from this period.

1896 - 2 August: His Mother Anna Da Lisca also died. From this moment there is a radical change in Francis' life. He avoided the company of nobles and chose the company of the humble and poor. He chose modest clothes and mixed together to beg for a plate of soup at the friars' canteen.

1897 - 27 May: He accepted to be the baptismal godfather of a poor boy, Goffredo Friedmann, who passed from Lutheranism to Catholicism by the apostolic zeal of the cleric Calabria.

1898 - 30 April: He enrolled in the *"Pious Union for assistance to the poor and sick"*, founded by the cleric Calabria, with the approval of his Cardinal Bishop Luigi di Canossa.

1899 – **1908**: He became an active member of the "San Vincent de Paul Conference". He was entrusted to keeping the annual report of the conference activity.

1900: He took interest in his brother Giovanni, owner of the Pompei-Perez building, to have the Calabria family lodged on the ground floor of the building, in the house left free by the family coachman.

1901-1908: He was appointed Prefect Administrator of the lay Congregation of Charity, of Zevio.

1907 - September: He procured a house in Vicolo Case Rotte for Fr. Calabria to house the boys. He Contributed financially to its restoration. The boys took possession of it on November 26, 1907.

1908, 18 May: He dealt with the purchase of the large Somascan convent, in via san Zeno in Monte no. 23. He Paid the deposit and the preliminary costs. He sold part of its assets for the first renovations of San Zeno in Monte house.

1908 - 23 September: Fr. Calabria, in a modest hotel in Ceraino, read "*some holy Norms*" and laid the foundations of the first nucleus of "brothers", the seed of the future Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence. Fr. Calabria, Fr Desenzani, Earl Perez and the young Gigio Adami were present.

1908 - 26 November: The boys took possession of the house in San Zeno in Monte

1908 - 11 November: On a journey in a cart with his sisters Lavinia and Maria, the vehicle was turned upside down and Francis was

crushed under the wheels. He had double fractures: Tibial shaft and fibula. He remained in the hospital for two months.

1909 - 20 August: He sold all his goods, left his home and went to live among the poor of San Zeno in Monte.

1931 - 9 July: All brothers with Fr. Calabria gathered in San Zeno in Monte to celebrate 70 years of brother Francis Perez.

1932 - 19 March: Francis professed the triennial vows as a religious in the Congregation of the Poor Servants of Divine Providence, immediately after the diocesan approval, which took place on February 11, 1932, by Msgr. Girolamo Cardinale, bishop of Verona.

1935: From this period, Brother Francis' health deteriorated. He remained almost always on bed.

1937 - 8 September: Brother Francis renewed for the last time his triennial religious profession.

1937 - 23 November: Brother Francis requested for the Anointing of the sick.

1937 - 4 December: on the first Saturday of the month, at 4.30 am, brother Francis Perez, at the age of 76 and 24 years of religious life, passed away holy. He died of degenerative myocardia

1937 - 5 December: Brother Francis was buried as a poor man, as he wanted to do so through his testament. He was buried in the monumental cemetery of Verona inherited to the Poor Servants.

1943: Fr. Calabria asked Fr. Albano Businello to write a biography of Brother Francis Perez.

1967 - 4 December: His mortal remains were disentombed and transferred and the remains were entombed in san Zeno in Monte.

1980: Fr. Cirillo Boscagin[5] wrote and the Congregation published the first biography.

1988 - 5 December: Francis Beatification process began.

1990 Closing of the Beatification process, Verona.

2007 June 1, Pope Benedict XVI approved the promulgation of heroic Virtues of *Francis Maria Perez* and it is published in the 'L'Amico of 2007 July-August.

[5] Cirillo Boscagin, *Francesco Perez, una nobiltà a servizio dei poveri***,** Tip. Opera Fr. Calabria, Verona, 1980

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PRAYER TO VEN.FRANCIS PEREZ

God our Father, infinite love, we praise and thank you for the wonders you have done in your Servant Francis Perez.

We thank you for his remarkable charity, humility, faith, and spirit of prayer; for the gift of righteousness and the Christian wisdom which he practiced as a shining witness in his public ministry.

We thank you, for his total renouncement of worldly affluence and for the example by which he taught us to love and serve the poor.

Father, we implore you, to glorify on earth your servant Ven. Francis Perez so that following his examples people of our time be encouraged to fulfil in their life the works of the gospel.

Listen with compassion our prayer, granting us the grace we ardently ask through his intercession …… (*mention the grace*) through Christ our Lord. Amen

Seen and approved, Msgr. Giuseppe Amari,
Bishop of Verona. Verona December01, 1989

Ps. *Postulation office for the beatification of Ven. Francis Perez. Graces received thru Ven Francis Perez inform*:

https://www.doncalabria.it/